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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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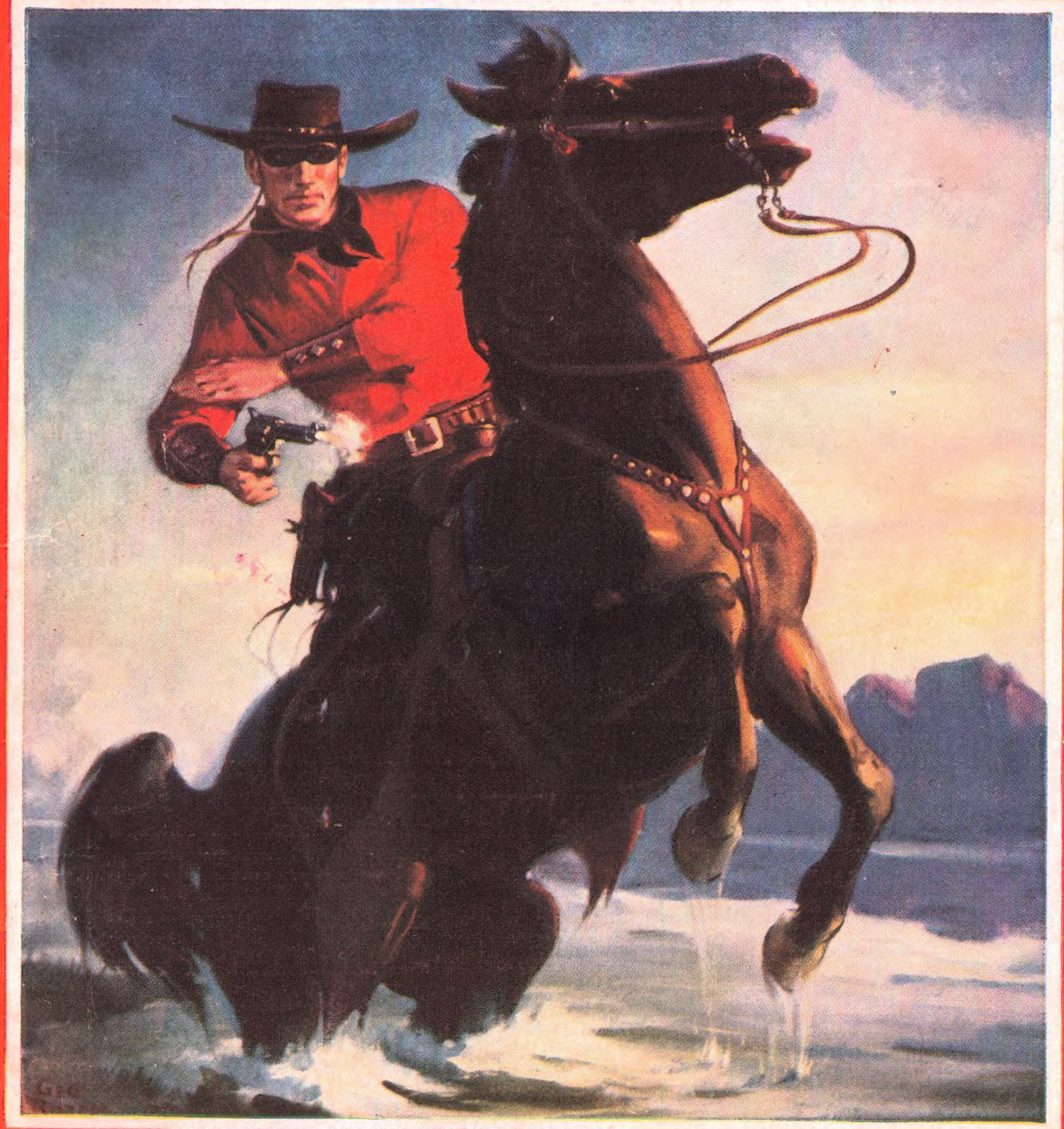

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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

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DAVID X. MANNERS
Editor

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Conducted by NELSON C. NYE

1. The Horse That Can Outsprint Lightning

MANY people have asked me, "What is a Quarter Horse?" It's a difficult question to answer in a sentence or two. The dictionary says he's a "type of horse developed on the ranges of the United States, having great endurance under the saddle, and named for his high speed at a quarter of a mile." But that tells only part of the story.

Sure, the Quarter Horse is and has been the West's most popular breed—but his history goes back farther than that—goes back two hundred years before the Thoroughbred, which makes him America's oldest, still-existing type of running horse.

The Denton mare, so frequently coupled with young Sam Bass, was an unregistered Quarter Horse. The king of all train robbers, Black Jack Ketchum—as well as many of those who ate his dust—rode Quarter Horses, and Paul Revere, of course, rode to fame on one of these short-coupled quarter-milers.

But you still haven't got the whole picture.

This is the horse the cowboy talked to—the one he chose when he went a-galin'. This is the cayuse he rode through deserts, through the icy teeth of raging blizzards, through hell and, very often, through high water. He was a "getaway" horse and, as such, commended himself very highly to the needs of those who were on the dodge.

Like the Arabian of old he has extraordinary understanding, an indomitable spirit and hoofs that move on wings of the wind. He has always been a *using* horse and in that lies the chief reason for his popularity.

He can pull a plow or draw a wagon. He has been used for sport as well as for war, but always, by the best of each generation of breeders, this horse was bred for blinding speed.

Before the American Revolution, Mr. J. F. D. Smith in his remarkable book, *The Horse of America,* wrote: "In the southern part of the colony (Virginia) and in North Carolina they are much attached to quarter racing, which is always a match between two horses to run one quarter of a mile straight out . . . and they have a breed that performs it with astonishing velocity, beating every other with great ease."

What Smith wrote in that day is still true. But in addition to his acknowledged superiority on the track, the Quarter Horse may also excel as a cowhorse, be a topflight saddler, a dogged stayer in a trail ride, whip all comers at rodeo and be a crack mount on the polo field.

He was known to Thomas Jefferson as an American Quarter Running Horse and, before that day, as a Chickasaw, so called after the Indians who fetched him north out of what is now Florida. He was commonly regarded as a recognizable type long before he received breed status during the middle of the 17th Century, and he goes back a great deal farther than that.

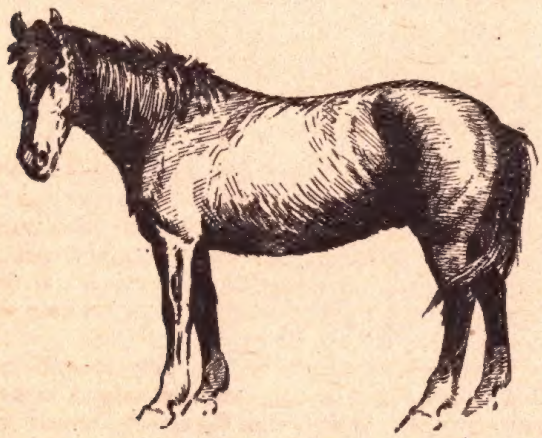
The forebears of the Chickasaws came originally from the royal ranches of Spain, via ships of the fleet of Admiral Pedro Menendez de Aviles when, in 1565, he founded Spanish Guale (Florida) and stocked it with, among other things, 100 head of highly prized horses. These latter, by blood, were linebred Orientals—Spanish Barbs—a breed at that time considered tops. It was this breed that the Conquistadores rode, and its history dated back to the time of the Mohammedan Conquest when their ancestors had been gathered from Syria, Egypt, Nubia, Zeneta, Barbary and Arabia.

So you see that the Quarter Horse is not a new breed, although it had no real registry prior to 1940 when the American Quarter Horse Association was organized, and as I said before, it was developed well in advance of the American Thoroughbred. In fact, it

played a considerable part in helping that breed get started, though this is not now generally admitted. But this is how it worked.

In Colonial days, imported Orientals (usually called "Thoroughbreds" by the British) were crossed with speedy Chickasaw mares. The better level of their offspring, which could do four miles or better in crack time were included in the American Stud Book—those that could not were "quarter horses."

After the Thoroughbred had moved pretty well along toward becoming an established breed type, the dictates of wealth and fashion drove the short horse from the East. Frontiersmen took him up in large numbers and



he became extremely popular in what is now the Middle West for his versatility and general usefulness. The first racetracks in Kentucky, for example, were built to accommodate the sprinting of quarter-milers. But as these regions became "more civilized" and, of course, more pretentious, the Colonial short horse wound up in Texas where he was crossed with the Mustang to beget better cowponies. This was the beginning of the modern Quarter Horse.

The Mustang cross was an almighty good one, the Mustang being directly descended from the best in Spanish horses. He passed along, too, the vast stamina engendered by three hundred years on the open range.

Mighty names came into being—Steel Dust, Lock's Rondo, Yellow Jacket, Old Cold Deck, Barney Owens, Sykes Rondo, Sam King, Old Fred, Traveler, Possom, Little Joe, Peter McCue, Santanon, Midnight and a host of fabulous others, each of these horses said to make chain lightning stand still by comparison.

In 1948 and again last year, our friend the Quarter Horse led all breeds in the number of registrations.

Next issue I will tell you about Top Man, a living stallion who can trace his ancestry, in male line direct, to a son of Sir Archy—called Copper Bottom—which Sam Houston imported to the Republic of Texas in 1839.

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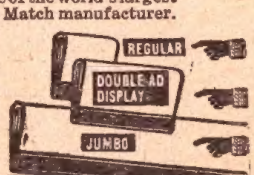

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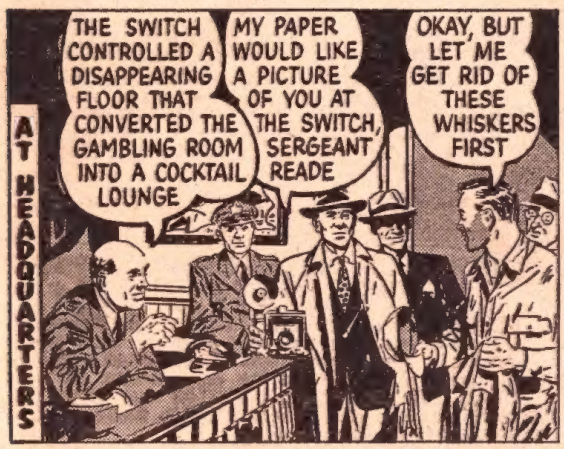
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Lasso Larrups

by Harold Helfer

DURING a cattlemen's convention in Walsenburg, Colo., three cowboys rode their horses into a tavern and were served, but one of the horses bolted into the kitchen. Now there's a sign on the tavern: "No Horses Admitted."

NAVAJO INDIANS use chromium ore scrapings to paint their faces yellow for ceremonial dances.

THE SANTA FE TRAIL was in use before Columbus discovered America.

WILD BILL HICKOK, Daniel Boone and their ilk must be turning over in their graves, but in a fudge making contest in Lewiston, Mont., the other day—a feature of the Central Montana Fair and Rodeo—men walked off with both the first and second prizes.

UP-AND-COMING film star Steve Cochran has been a ranch hand and cow puncher.

THE U. S. had its peak number of horses in 1915—21,430,000. Now there are less than 3,000,000.

IT WASN'T the paleface extras playing the Indians who gave the makeup man a workout at the filming of a new RKO Western movie. Twenty of the fifty real Indians needed for one scene were even paler than the palefaces and had to have bronze makeup for the Technicolor cameras.

IN MISSOULA, MONT., an impulsive cowboy was recently sent to jail for ninety days for leaping from his horse and "bulldogging" a pretty blonde as she strolled through a shady glen.

"BEAR GREASE," says Kelly Chamandy, the big animal man of northern Ontario, "is good for every ailment of man, but it's particularly good for human hair. Baldness is unknown among the Indians because they use it."

EARLY AMERICANS found the Indians playing a dice-like game that became known as "hubhub," because of the shouts of "hub-hub-hub" that accompanied it.

AT YANKTON S. DAK., Rancher Tom Brennan came in with a 106-pound blue catfish that fought so hard he had to shoot it.

IN ARIZONA, there's a kind of cactus known as cancer cactus. It's so called because of its abnormally branched-out top.

THEY'RE STILL TOUGH in Santa Fe. A man was arrested there for shooting up a radio when members of his family hadn't turned it off at his request.

IN WALLACE, IDA., the other day, a store clerk was the winner in a raffle and his prize was—a gold mine. As part of the celebration of Wallace's Gold Rush days, Carl F. Taylor won the Dew Drop mine, which hasn't been worked since the turn of the century, but which once produced $35,000 in gold.

THE TELEGRAPH

A WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

Daring deadly ambush guns, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk save a child's life—and tangle with one of the West's wiliest killers!

TRAIL

BY WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CHAPTER I

Condor Country

THE two condors knew, with a clairvoyant instinct peculiar to their species, that death would come soon, probably tonight, for this elderly woman pinned to the mountain ledge by the weight of her dead palomino.

For two days and a night Grandma Karen Solvang had fought the predatory birds away from her baby granddaughter, with a manzanita stick which was now frayed and useless. All afternoon the condors had inched closer and closer, ignoring her switch.

The compounded horrors which she had endured since the ambush attack would have tested the stamina of a man in the prime of life. She was sixty-six years old and her leg that was trapped by the horse's weight was broken in two places.

Had it only been two days since the echo of ambush guns had startled the brooding California mountains? The first shot had dropped Mrs. Solvang's horse; the second had struck her husband in the head, spilling him over the rim into the deep crevice they had been skirting.

Paralyzed, the men stared at the six-guns covering them

What Secret Gripped the Hurricane Deck—and

It comforted Grandma Solvang to know that her Holger hadn't known what hit him. His full attention had been on the condor's nest topping the rocky needle just ahead; a condor's nest was the objective of their trek into the Hurricane Deck country.

Holger Solvang's steeldust, Viking, with their packs, had bolted, only to be bullet-dumped into the abyss.

Karen Solvang's memory of the ambush was fragmentary, for in falling with her slain horse, she had been temporarily stunned. All she knew for certain was that two guns had been firing, from the ridge above; one report sharp, echoless, the other deep and booming.

If the ambushers had come down to investigate their work while she had been unconscious, she had no way of knowing. The baby, Ingrid, strapped in her wicker basket behind her grandmother's cantle, had prattled about a "big man in a big hat" when Grandma had come to her senses, but that could mean anything.

Time had ceased to have any meaning. Starvation, exposure to daytime heat and night's chill winds, aggravated the agony this woman suffered. Her mental torture was even worse than what she had to endure from the horse's bulk bearing down on her injured leg.

It was for the baby, now sleeping peacefully, that Karen Solvang felt her keenest anguish. Their chance of rescue by passing travelers was scant, for the Hurricane Deck, as this wild area here was called, was a high, rugged, waterless plateau, as sterile as a crater on the moon.

THE Solvangs had made this trek to the San Raphael Mountains to bag a giant condor, one wing of which, brought back to their home in the Santa Ynez Valley, would be worth five hundred dollars to a boarder at their stage-coach hotel.

That boarder, a man named Phil Webster, a surveyor and engineer who was also an amateur naturalist, had scoffed at the contention of local residents that the fabulous California condor attained wing-spreads beyond ten feet. Holger Solvang, having seen condors measuring as high as fourteen feet from wing tip to wing tip, had made a five-hundred-dollar bet with Webster that he could go to the Hurricane Deck and bring back a ten-footer. The Solvangs were a frugal Danish couple to whom an honestly earned five hundred dollars loomed as a reward worth this trek to the Hurricane Deck.

Little Ingrid, orphaned last winter, had begged to accompany her grandparents on this junket. Almost two, she was more used to horseback rides in the basket Grandpa Holger had built for her than she was with piggy-back rides. It had not seemed foolhardy to bring Ingrid along; after all, the Hurricane Deck country had not been an outlaw hideout since the days of Joaquin Murrieta, back in the early Fifties.

But now Karen Solvang, with closed eyes, was praying to her God for deliverance, as she had not prayed since her girlhood days in Vilbjarg.

The two condors were still crouched there when she opened her eyes. These were the largest birds in the world's sky. Their purple basilisk gaze appeared focused on Ingrid, sleeping cuddled against the flaxen mane of the dead palomino.

Their bald, orange-fleshed heads were bobbing in rhythm to the throbbing of their wattled necks. A two-year-old baby would be a succulent morsel for these scavengers. The thought of it brought a hoarse cry from Karen Solvang. Yesterday, a shout would have caused the great vultures to withdraw.

Now they ignored her as they sat waiting—waiting.

The baby stirred in her sleep; the condors headed up, ruffling their feathers obscenely, beaks clacking nightmarishly as if they were communicating in some telegraphic code of their own.

Sent a Midnight Assassin After Wayne Morgan?

Karen had been mercifully spared seeing the condors attack her husband's corpse, and Viking's carcass.

These condors were a species nearing extinction; this California malpais was their last sanctuary in this country. South America was generally considered their only habitat now. But yesterday the enamel-blue sky had been aswarm with the fearsome white-winged fowls, forty or more of them, drawn to this canyon by the scent or sight of carrion. Gorged, they had vanished; all but this pair.

Down in the Santa Ynez, folks liked to tell tall tales about the giant condors. So far as Mrs. Solvang knew, no human had ever been attacked by one. But her neighbors in the valley had seen condors swoop down and bear squirming lambs and new-dropped calves off into the blue, as an owl might clutch a hapless field mouse in its talons.

Sometime during the night, Karen Solvang knew, death would bring her release from her suffering. That would leave little Ingrid alone. By tomorrow the child would be too weak from hunger and exposure to toddle around.

Summoning her last strength, she ground her hands into the rubble and hurled a cloud of dust and pebbles at the crouching condors. She felt the air rush cool to her sun-blistered cheeks from the beat of wings as the scavenger birds emitted their deafening cries and took off, their great pinions catching the heat-wave up-drafts above the canyon rim and soaring high on motionless wings.

But they would be back—soon. Thousands of feet above, other condors wheeled and spiraled against the blue. They were waiting for Karen Solvang to die, so they could feast on the palomino and on her own flesh.

WAYNE MORGAN

The discordant calls of the vultures roused little Ingrid. The child stirred, opened eyes as blue as the skies of Denmark, and stared at her grandmother.

"BABY hungry, Gramma."

The childish plea cut Karen Solvang to the core. She was thinking, "Those condors could scoop Ingrid up and fly off with her a lot easier than they could a heifer calf down in the valley. They would not wait for her to die, as they are waiting for me.

Ingrid had had nothing to eat since this ordeal had begun. Their food was in the big pouches which Holger carried on Viking. And the water in the canteen looped to the pommel of Mrs. Solvang's saddle was almost gone now.

She unscrewed the cap and poured the last precious drops of lukewarm water into it. Ingrid, her blond curls plastered to her head with perspiration, drank greedily, thirst unsatisfied.

"Where is Grampa, Gramma?"

That was a question this child had asked a hundred times, yesterday and today. She had been asleep in her basket when the ambush shots had come. Her grandmother's broad back had shielded her view of the trail ahead, and the tragedy being staged upon it.

"Ingie, darling—" The words choked in the helpless woman's throat. She heard the cacophonic cries of the condors, wheeling lower overhead, coming back to light on the ledge. "Ingie, do you see those pretty flowers over yonder?"

The little girl got unsteadily to her feet and stared in the direction of her grandmother's pointing arm. A few feet below the rimrock, an ocotillo had taken root. Its scarlet blossoms were just visible from where Karen Solvang lay. She had watched those flowers with a morbid fascination all morning, a plan taking shape in her mind. A plan to save little Ingrid the horror of the condor's eventual swoop.

"Yes, Grandma. Pretty."

Mrs. Solvang swallowed hard. Her brain was not functioning; her thoughts were blurred, off focus.

"Ingrid, my sweet—" Karen was whispering in the little one's ear now, fighting for the self-control to keep her words coherent. "Gramma would like the pretty flowers. Ingie can pick them for Gramma, like she picks the geraniums at home."

A glimmer of interest showed in the child's fever-bright eyes now. She took a step toward the brink of the ledge, her little body trembling under the loose blue gingham frock.

"Baby get flowers for Gramma."

Words choked up in Karen Solvang's throat. She was sending this baby to her death, knowing the hundred-foot drop below that flowering ocotillo would be infinitely more merciful to Ingrid than what the condors could do. Yet now that Ingrid was on her way toward the chasm's edge, all the woman's instincts rebelled and she called desperately, "Ingie, baby—come back—come back!"

The child stumbled on the loose stones underfoot and fell forward, her head overhanging the abyss. Off-balance, it seemed that only a miracle could keep her from plunging out of sight into the depths.

Weakness caused her to lie there, gasping like a grounded trout. She was four feet beyond reach of the grandmother, pinned under the palomino's bulk. If the baby made a reach for the ocotillo blooms now—

A shadow blotted out the sun. Karen Solvang recoiled, propping her body off the ground as she looked up to see the condors in a shrieking dive from the zenith.

Like a sleeper in the toils of a hellish dream, she saw the pouncing bird lock its bladelike talons in her grandchild's dress. Like a ball bouncing off the ground, the great bird left the earth, shearing away into yawning space with mighty wings churning the thin air of this high altitude.

The tortured woman was past screaming, past praying. Her red-shot eyes remained glued to the blue-clad bundle hanging from the condor's claws as the bird of prey banked in a tight spiral, closely followed by its screaming mate.

Her head lifted, the horror in her threatening to blank out her flagging senses as she saw the vulture wing into an up-column of air, shooting skyward. Little Ingrid was not struggling, as might a sheep or calf; perhaps God in His infinite mercy had caused the baby to lose consciousness.

AND then, out of nowhere, yet seemingly close at hand, Karen Solvang heard a man's voice lash out a desperate order:

"Hold your fire, Hawk! That buzzard is heading for its nest on the crag up there. A shot would make it drop that baby!"

It must be part of the nightmare, that voice. The grandmother heard the abrasive scrape of horse's hoofs on gravel, back down the trail, but the sound made no sense to her.

Her eyes were straining into the hot glare of the westering sun now, as she saw the condor gliding in ever-tightening circles around a lofty pinnacle of chimney rock. There was a fuzzy formation at the apex of that granite needle which Holger had told her was a condor's nest.

She saw the condor, still closely followed by its mate, brake its descent to the rock chimney top with threshing wings, coming to a gentle stop on the lofty nest as it deposited the blue-clad baby there.

Blackness swirled around Karen Solvang then. She averted her eyes from the condor's nest, knowing the two birds would now start quarreling over their prey, rending it to shreds.

And then her eyes beheld a sight which shocked her out of her swooning descent into oblivion. Towering over her were two men on horseback—one a sun-bronzed cowpuncher, to judge by his Stetson, cowboots, chaps and spurs; the other a mahogany-hued Indian wearing white drill pants, and a bandeau girdling his head to support a single eagle feather.

The white man was forking a hammerhead roan, the Indian a gray. Trailing them were a magnificent black stallion and a pinto pack pony. Both men were aiming .30-.30 rifles up at the sky, sunlight making a fluid blue glinting off the octagonal barrels.

It did not even occur to Mrs. Solvang that these might be the two men who had ambushed her. All she knew was that they were seeking to kill the feathered kidnapers of her grandchild.

Helpless in a paralysis of fascination, she watched the white man drawing his bead, concentration drawing a rime of wetness from his skin. She saw him squeeze off his shot, smelled the raw bite of gunpowder, heard the thunderous clap of the gun's report.

Summoning strength from somewhere, she swung her gaze from the two horsemen to the rock pinnacle.

She saw a spurt of feathers floating off against the hot sunshine. Then a condor's shape toppled slowly off the nest on the rock chimney and began its fluttering, sodden plummet through space.

In the air above the nest, the condor's mate was hovering, its shrill caws drifting down to assault the ears.

Behind Grandma Solvang, the Indian's rifle made its deafening roar, and she saw the surviving condor's smooth upward flight suddenly falter as, one wing bullet-crippled, it lost control of its element and began its crumpled, looping topple earthward.

Then the Indian and the white man were kneeling beside her. The cowboy rested his smoking carbine against the dead palomino's head as he touched her shoulders and said urgently:

"If the child was alive when the bird picked her up, there is a good chance she is still alive in that nest. Tell me—"

Karen Solvang's brain was spinning as she stared up into a pair of keen blue eyes in a weather-bronzed face. Those eyes were imploring her to speak while there was yet time.

"Ingrid—was alive. God bless—God bless—"

The man released his grip on her shoulders and stood up. Turning, to the Indian he said crisply, "Take care of her, Blue Hawk. I'm going to climb up to that nest."

That was the last that Grandma Solvang heard before soothing oblivion anesthetized her senses.

CHAPTER II

Talon Scars

FROM the saddle of the hammerhead roan which he had ridden up the ledge trail, the cowboy, Wayne Morgan, unbuckled a coil of sturdy sisal-fiber lariat.

His eyes were studying the slim needle of rock which he must scale at all costs while daylight held, before the stolen baby regained consciousness—if indeed she were still alive—and toppled over the lip of the condor's nest.

Appraising his chances, he found them slim; the hazard to himself was great, the odds appalling to contemplate. He judged the granite spire to be around two hundred feet from base to summit, perhaps a hundred feet in circumference below, tapering to less than a square yard at the top. Its vertical sides bore the patina of the ages, but erosion and earthquake over a millennium of time had seamed and pitted its lithic surface.

Hurrying past the unconscious woman and the dead palomino, Morgan started scrambling up the steep slope of rock which led to the base of the granite chimney. His shop-made kangaroo leather cowboots, high of heel and fitted with blunt-roweled spurs, were the worst possible footgear for climbing.

At the base of the pinnacle, fifty yards away from the scene of tragedy, he halted to unbuckle his bulhide chaps. His levi-clad legs might need the protection of that thick leather, but the chaps were heavy and he could not tolerate any unnecessary weight for this terrific climb.

Heeding the same need to lighten the load he must carry, he removed his double-shell belts and their holstered Colt .45 revolvers. If other condors swooped to attack him on the way up, his Yaqui Indian compadre, Blue Hawk, could be depended upon to fight them off with a rifle.

Morgan was already beginning to breathe hard as, looping the reata coil over one shoulder, he began his climb, clawing for hand holds in the slick rock. At this high altitude the oxygen content of the air was thin; it reacted on a man's heart and lungs, sapping his strength.

Twenty feet up the vertical stone face of the pinnacle, this man in the garb of the Border cattle country paused on a narrow ledge to recover his wind.

Below him, on the ledge trail, he saw the Indian dragging the palomino's carcass off the injured leg of the insensible woman, using ropes tied to the stiffened hind and forelegs. The ropes were dallied to the saddle-horn of Midnight, the coal-black stallion, a striking mount in their little remuda.

He saw the sun glint off Blue Hawk's coppery cheeks as the Yaqui glanced up to check on Morgan's progress. Then the Indian vaulted the rolled-over carcass of the palomino and stooped to lift the injured woman to one side.

They had first aid supplies in their alforja bags. Blue Hawk, educated in the mission school in his youth and wise to the ways of the frontier and the treatment for its emergencies, would save the woman's life if that were possible.

Wayne Morgan resumed his desperate climb, his fingers beginning to bleed from the rough contact with the rock as he sought for a hand-hold here, a foot-hold there. Reaching a smooth, wind-polished surface where further climbing was impossible, he shook out the coil of rope. Ten feet above was a protuding knob of splintered rock.

He managed to get his loop over the jutting chunk on his third cast, began pulling himself up hand over hand, praying for solidity in his anchor. If the granite should be rotten, and give way, that would spell his finish.

During the eternity it took for him to climb the rope and hook an elbow over the out-jut of granite, one part of Morgan's mind still was on the elderly woman

down on the ledge below.

Who was she, and what was a woman of her age doing up here in the rugged San Raphael country of inland Santa Barbara County? The baby was her granddaughter, perhaps.

NOWHERE in America was there a stretch of unexplored mountain country, labeled "desert" on the map of California, to compare in ruggedness with this Hurricane Deck north of the ancient city of Santa Barbara. Its very isolation was the reason for Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk being here today.

Blue Hawk was the only man living who knew that the cowboy who called himself Wayne Morgan was in fact the Masked Rider, known from Texas to California and from Mexico to Canada as the Robin Hood outlaw of the West. The background of this man of dual personality, as well as his real name, was a secret even to Blue Hawk, his constant companion of the danger trails. All the Yaqui knew, and all that interested him, was that the Masked Rider, in that rôle or in his character of Wayne Morgan, wandering cowboy, had dedicated his life to aiding downtrodden and oppressed peoples wherever he found them.

"Hold your fire, Hawk!" Wayne Morgan shouted to the Indian

On the frontier the Masked Rider's

friends were legion, those who had known his beneficence, freely given for only the satisfaction of seeing the law triumphant, the guilty punished, the weak succored. But there were also men, many of them toting law badges, who would shoot the Robin Hood outlaw on sight in order to cash in on the collective bounties posted on his scalp.

Such men never paused to ask questions about the righteousness of the masked avenger's aims, and scoffed at the rumors that he, himself, was a victim of evil men.

But that was true. For, early in his altruistic career, criminals and outlaws had seized on the fact of his mystery and that he was always masked, to lay their own crimes to him, charges that he could not refute without baring the secret he had carried inviolate for so many years—that of his actual identity.

So many vicious outlaws, masked and wearing distinctive cloaks like that worn by the real Masked Rider, had committed such a multitude of crimes in his name that now he and his Yaqui companion had become hunted men, prey for bounty hunters wherever they went.

Only three weeks ago they had experienced their latest injustice of this sort in Nevada, following a particularly vicious killing in a bank robbery done by a masked man and a companion who had appeared to be an Indian, but in all probability had been a painted white man. A Nevada sheriff's posse had ridden out, and before long the real Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had been sighted.

That posse had driven them, with their four horses, across the California line. The barren wastes of Death Valley had swallowed the fugitives, but they had lived to cross the Panamints and the Sierra Nevadas, to span the great central valley and reach the forbidding, untamed wilderness of the lofty mountain badlands in Santa Barbara County—the Hurricane Deck. Here they felt sure they would be safe from bounty-hungry posses.

Late this afternoon, following a ledge trail in search of the water-hole they hoped to find at its end—game traces invariably led to water in desert country like this—they had rounded a shoulder of rock to come head on into a scene of tragedy without parallel in their experience.

They had seen the giant condor snatch up a child and soar skyward with its captive. And Wayne Morgan knew with the certainty of his deep and reverent faith that some higher Authority had guided his desperate rifle shot, to destroy the great vulture before it could rend its small victim with predatory beak and claws.

Sweat poured in rivulets from Morgan's skin. He left the bloody tracks of his fingers on each fresh hand hold now. A fortuitous ten-inch fault in the rocky spire, girdling the pinnacle in an upward twisting angle, enabled him to make better time as he reached and passed the halfway point in his ascent.

Twice more, as he neared the crest of the chimney, he had to use his lasso to by-pass smooth areas of rock which nothing less than a whiptail lizard could have climbed.

HE WAS within twenty feet of the condor's nest when he was forced by his overtaxed heart to rest again. He could see the guano-fouled details of the nest now, a crudely constructed pillow of mesquite stubs and candlewood wands.

Bellied up against the sun-warmed slope of rock, his cowboots clinging for purchase to a ledge barely wide enough to accommodate his feet, he had his look around. Under less trying circumstances the vista would have been breath-taking in its wild grandeur. To the south and west he could see the blue, gunmetal surface of the Pacific Ocean, broken by the Channel Islands off the Santa Barbara coast. Immediately below lay the shadow-pooled, hazy expanse of Santa Ynez Valley, the river there a meandering platinum thread through green verdure, a vast and fertile cattle range given over to ranches dating back to the Spanish days.

Northward was a seemingly endless

chain of mountains, stretching off and away toward the vast depression of the San Joaquin Valley. It was like being on the roof of the world here. But the beauty was lost to Wayne Morgan, aware that his chance of getting safely back off this pinnacle was doubtful indeed.

He resumed his back-breaking, muscle-straining climb, finally getting his sisal reata solidly anchored on a spike of rock alongside the condor's nest. So far he had heard no sound from up there to indicate that this perilous climb had not been in vain.

And then he was reaching a bloody hand out to seize the spike of rock, and he could see into the cup of the condor nest. Lying there, alongside two white, ostrichlike eggs, was the baby girl in the blue frock.

Her dress had been torn by knifelike talons; there were crimson stains spreading on the fabric. But as Wayne Morgan clung there, tortured with exhaustion, he saw the little form stir, the blonde-ringleted head lift, and fear-widened blue eyes, just emerging from unconsciousness, peered up at him.

"It's all right, baby," Wayne Morgan panted hoarsely. "We'll get down. God will see to that, honey. . . ."

Daylight was a lingering, burned-out caldron glow over the Pacific when Wayne Morgan reached the half-way point in his descent of the rocky spire, to find Blue Hawk waiting for him. The Indian had tied ropes together to form a continuous ladder to the base of the pinnacle.

Baby Ingrid had been a quivering, soft little bundle tied to Morgan's broad back during that infinitely hazardous descent, but not once had her voice been raised in whimpered protest or sobbing fear.

Darkness was flowing over the Hurricane Deck when Wayne Morgan staggered up to the little campfire which the Yaqui had built. The baby's grandmother was conscious now, resting on a blanket just inside the glimmer of firelight. To Wayne Morgan in that moment, seeing Blue Hawk come into the firelight with Ingrid's trembling body cradled in his muscular arms, there was something incongruous, yet infinitely tender in the Indian's solicitude.

The incongruity came in recalling that Blue Hawk was a Yaqui sub-chief, a member of a tribe known as one of the most bloodthirsty on the continent. And as the Masked Rider's partner, Blue Hawk had stamped out the life of many a foe with knife and gun, arrow and tomahawk. Yet, handing Ingrid down to her grandmother, Blue Hawk was as gentle as the child's own father could have been, and Morgan thought he heard the Indian crooning a weird rhythm. That, Morgan believed, must be some ancient tribal lullaby Hawk himself had heard as a papoose.

Tears streamed from Grandma Solvang's eyes as she looked up at Morgan and the Indian, holding Ingrid tightly to her breast. Blue Hawk had expertly splinted and bound the woman's broken leg and had given her food and drink from their pack.

WHEN Ingrid had eaten, and fallen into a child's untroubled slumber, Mrs. Solvang told the two rescuers who she was and the fantastic reason for her presence here on the Hurricane Deck.

"My husband Holger," she added sadly, "was a humble man, without enemies, loved by all who know him. We own the San Marcos stage-coach line which handles the mail and passenger traffic between Santa Barbara and the Santa Ynez settlements. The little girl, as you must have guessed, is my granddaughter. My son and his wife died of cholera last winter. My youngest daughter, Hedwiga, who lives with us at the stage station, plans to adopt Ingrid as soon as she gets married this fall."

Wayne Morgan sat beside the dying embers of the campfire, peering up at the ragged skyline of the ridge above them. Two days ago, gunmen had crouched somewhere up there where the stars now burned like crystals in the filtered mountain air.

Morgan doubted if the ambushers were

still there or anywhere near, after all this time. But he knew they must have left sign, and he could never leave this country without making some attempt to bring such brutal killers to justice. And here was something that called for the vengeance of the Masked Rider.

Karen Solvang's panting drawl, burred with a melodic Danish accent, drew Morgan's thoughts back to reality.

"We were on a condor hunt," she was saying. "We keep overnight guests at our stage stop in Santa Ynez, and recently we have been boarding a group of workmen engaged in stringing a telegraph line over the Pass to Santa Barbara. Their foreman is an educated man, an engineer named Phil Webster—"

The woman should have been resting, but Morgan and Blue Hawk sensed her need to talk herself out. They made no remonstrance when it appeared that her mind was wandering onto trivial and irrelevant by-paths.

"Mr. Webster scoffed at the stories he heard about these California condors being so huge," she went on. "He offered Holger five hundred dollars to bring him a condor's wing that would measure even three feet in length."

Grandma Solvang pulled in a deep, shuddering breath. "We needed that money. Holger and I have hunted deer in these mountains many times. We knew how easy it would be to bring back a condor, perhaps one measuring fourteen feet from wing tip to wing tip. And so we made this trek to the Hurricane Deck."

Wayne Morgan picked apart the woman's story in his mind. It did not strike him as logical that the telegraph line engineer, Webster, of whom she spoke, would be so anxious to save a five-hundred-dollar wager that he would follow an old couple into this rough country and kill them. Worse than that—leave a baby girl and her grandmother to starve in this condor-infested Hades.

"It was a foolish thing, bringing Ingrid along," Grandma Solvang went on, pain making her writhe periodically in the blankets Morgan and Blue Hawk had provided. "But Hedwiga is so busy, cooking for the telegraph crew and our stage passengers, and her fiancé, Larry Gabler, is away so much, driving. And the baby loves horses. We did not think of danger."

Morgan glanced across the dying campfire toward his Yaqui partner. The wisdom of the ages seemed to be in the Indian's flint-black eyes, nesting in fine wrinkles from years of squinting into sun and distance.

"The senora says they had no enemies," Blue Hawk said soberly. "Yet this shooting was not accidental, Senor." The only way the Yaqui ever addresed his companion, whether as the Masked Rider or as Wayne Morgan, was as "Senor."

Morgan nodded agreement. The name of Hedwiga Solvang's intended husband had his fullest attention now. With the Solvangs dead, their bodies lost forever out in this unexplored country, who would inherit their San Marcos stage line? Hedwiga. If Hedwiga married this jehu named Larry Gabler, then Gabler would become owner of a stage-coaching business. Killing had been done with less than that at stake. This Gabler would bear investigating.

MORGAN was suddenly aware that Grandma Solvang had not spoken for a considerable time. But her pulse was steady, her breathing deep and regular. Sleep had come at last to the bereaved woman.

"We've got to get her to Santa Ynez and under a doctor's care as soon as possible tomorrow," Morgan said gravely, tucking the blankets closer around the sleeping woman's chin. "It will not be an easy thing to do."

"*Si,*" Blue Hawk muttered, and said no more.

But Morgan knew what the Yaqui was thinking—that if they left these mountains it would be at a terrible risk to themselves. For already undoubtedly word had gone abroad, spread by the Nevada manhunters who had failed to catch them, that the Masked Rider and

his Yaqui trail companion probably were in the southern California country—if they had lived to cross Death Valley. Every bounty hunter within miles would be on the watch for strangers, particularly any stranger riding with a red man. And, once caught, it would be difficult to account for themselves.

Both men knew that in taking Mrs. Solvang back to her home they might well be riding straight into trouble. For Santa Ynez, where she lived, was a sizeable valley settlement. There would be a marshal there, or a deputy sheriff from Santa Barbara. And by now they, as well as every other lawman in this part of California probably had been notified to keep a strict lookout for the Masked Rider and his Indian *compañero.*

But also both men well knew, though they did not speak of it, that there was no dodging their responsibility to Karen Solvang and the baby, no matter what the risk to their own safety.

CHAPTER III

Telegraph Boss

BY DAWN Wayne Morgan was ready for the trek out of the mountains to Santa Ynez. He and Blue Hawk had strapped Karen Solvang atop the Indian's gray, with Ingrid riding in the wicker basket behind the cantle.

When Morgan stepped into stirrups and wheeled his roan saddler around to pick up the gray's tail rope, Grandma Solvang eyed him through pain-bright eyes.

"Is not the red man to ride with us?" she asked.

Morgan shook his head. "Blue Hawk stays here. He is going to scout the ridge up yonder, senora. To see if your husband's ambushers left any sign."

Her eyes clouded, but she made no comment. Blue Hawk stood as immobile as a statue as the small cavalcade headed out along the ledge trail, into the shadow of the rocky pinnacle where the condors nested. As long as Grandma Solvang remained conscious, he knew, she would serve as guide to the nearest trail leading into the Santa Ynez Valley.

Turning away, Blue Hawk, carrying a rifle, started up the steep, brush-pocketed slope overlooking the scene of the ambush. With the agility of a lizard he zigzagged his way up through the scanty chaparral which laced this slope. When he reached the ridge top, he was on a level with the condors' nest on the two-hundred-foot pinnacle to northward.

Men riding horseback could easily reach this ridge, coming up out of the Santa Ynez Valley; but night winds had scoured the earth clean of possible tracks.

He scanned the lower reaches of the north slope. Most of the ridge was bald and naked rock. Twenty feet below the ridge, directly above the spot where the Solvangs had been riding along the lower ledge, was a scrub of red-barked manzanita growing out of a cleft boulder. Two men with rifles could have lain in hiding behind that bush and rock, unseen from below.

The Yaqui made his way on moccasined feet down to the riven boulder. The surface was smooth, sun-warmed rock here, with no tiny scratch made by a boot's hob nail or a trailing spur rowel.

Then a glint of metal caught the Indian's eye. He reached into the manzanitas and picked up what he had expected to find—a fired cartridge case, still bright and yellow, not exposed to the elements long enough to have become tarnished.

It was a .54 calibered centerfire cartridge. Blue Hawk tucked the shell into a pocket of his drill pants. The slug from that cartridge might have killed Holger Solvang, or drilled Karen's palomino.

Further search around the boulder rewarded Blue Hawk with a stub of brown-paper cigarette, pinched thin by the fingers of a man nursing his nerves against the vigil of waiting for his targets to appear on the trail below. There was another .54 shell bearing the mark of a triangular-shaped firing pin, and a tiny disk of tin, a half-inch in diameter, which at

first the Indian had difficulty in identifying.

Then, turning over the bright disk, he saw that it was enameled black, with a setting sun in yellow, ringed by the Spanish words *"La Puesta del Sol Tabaca."* Sunset brand chewing tobacco, a cut plug popular with Mexicanos who had become addicted to the gringo habit of chewing, but a tobacco too bitter for gringo tastes.

Blue Hawk moved on, and was disappointed when another hour's search up and down the ridge failed to turn up a single boot print or hoof mark. He made his way back down to the ledge where Midnight and the pinto pack horse were waiting.

Blue Hawk planned to travel down into the valley, to Santa Ynez, for a rendezvous with his compadre.

"There is an old Spanish mission at Santa Ynez," Wayne Morgan had said. "The most famous landmark in the valley. When you reach the settlement, hunt for cover due west of the mission. I'll join you as soon as possible."

Blue Hawk knew that Morgan had been as reluctant as he was himself to leave the sanctuary of the Hurricane Deck badlands. But he also knew that neither of them could return until they had run down the ambushers who had sought to destroy the Solvangs. . . .

NIGHT was a purple blanket over the fertile Santa Ynez valley. The windows of the San Marcos stage station gleamed like squares of gold off through the sycamores and live-oaks directly ahead of Wayne Morgan. The grueling return with the Solvangs from the Hurricane Deck was at last nearing its end.

The trek had taken a heavy toll of Morgan's strength, for the mountain walls flanking the valley on the north were roof-steep and had no man-made trails. Around noon, Grandma Solvang had lapsed into a coma, after she had gibbered in delirium. This had added to Morgan's mental strain. But the cool night breeze seemed to be bringing her relief after the punishing heat of the day. Her breathing was less stertorous now, her heart action stronger whenever Morgan checked her pulse.

Riding up to the stage office, Morgan saw a Concord drawn by six matched bays go racing off into the night, bound southeastward along the twisting road which crossed the Santa Ynez Mountains by way of the San Marcos Pass, with Santa Barbara as its terminus. He wondered if Larry Gabler was handling the lines.

The dust stirred up by the departing night stage drifted in heavy layers across the incoming riders. Morgan reined up in front of the two-story hotel and stage office, eyes probing the black shadows of the galleried porch. The hotel guests would probably be airing themselves in the cool of the evening.

"Hello, the house!" he called, stepping back to Blue Hawk's gray and starting to unbuckle the straps which kept the unconscious Mrs. Solvang in the saddle.

"Ho!" a man's voice answered from the Stygian gloom of the porch. *"Quien es?"*

"Is Senorita Hedwiga there?" Morgan called.

Morgan heard a tap of boot heels descending the steps from the hotel, and then a tall, golden-haired girl in her early twenties followed a fanwise bar of lamplight in his direction.

"I am Hedwiga Solvang," she said. "Can I be of help?"

Morgan waited until the girl was close before he said softly,

"Please do not be alarmed, Senorita Solvang, but I have your mother here. She is in need of a doctor."

Morgan heard the girl's sharp intake of breath as she came forward into the shadows. Then, her eyes accustoming themselves to the darkness, she made out the sagging shape of her mother. Ingrid was fast asleep in the wicker basket slung behind the cantle of the gray.

As gently as possible, Morgan reassured Hedwiga that her mother was alive, but that she had suffered a broken hip and shin bone as a result of an accident out in the mountains three days ago. He did not elaborate on the cause of the accident.

The girl for the present should be spared that double shock.

"Dad—where's Dad?" Hedwiga asked in a hoarse whisper, as she peered into Ingrid's basket to reassure herself of the little girl's safety.

"I—I left him up on the Deck, ma'am," Morgan said. "I'll give you the details later. Right now, we've got to get your mother to a doctor—"

Hedwiga Solvang recovered her composure with a rapidity which, under the circumstances, brought to Morgan a surge of admiration for the girl's finely-bred control.

"Dr. Mulvaney lives up the street," she said, gesturing toward the twinkling lights marking the center of the town. "If you will carry Mother into the house, I'll bring the doctor right away."

When the girl had hurried off into the night, Morgan finished the job of untying the unconscious woman and lifting her from the saddle. Knowing that Ingrid would be safe for the time being in her basket, he headed at once toward the hooked-back doors of the hotel lobby, carrying Grandma Karen as if she were a sleeping child.

There was a ripple of startled exclamations in English and Spanish from the group of men loafing on the porch chairs as Morgan headed up the steps and went inside.

He stared about the deserted lobby. A fire crackled in a great hearth of native stone to his left. The room was furnished rustically in California fashion with yucca wood chairs and sofas, Indian rugs, and the heads of mounted game adorning the walls.

BLUE HAWK

MORGAN saw a hallway leading toward the kichen in back and, on the assumption that the Solvangs would have their living quarters in that wing of the hotel, he headed across the lobby toward the corridor.

Halfway across the room, he heard steps hurrying after him and turned to see a group of men following him in off the porch. In the forefront of the group was

a tall man in a black Prince Albert coat, a gray Keevil hat, and well-polished boots.

"Great Scott, is that Mrs. Solvang?" that man exclaimed, overtaking Morgan.

"Yes," Morgan snapped. "Keep everyone back. Can you tell me where her bedroom is?"

The tall man turned sharply, the authority of his bearing causing the motley assortment of porch loafers to halt in their tracks. Half of them, Morgan noted, appeared to be Mexican laborers.

"Indeed—follow me," the frock-coated man said, passing Morgan and heading into the hall.

Opening the third door on the left, he stood aside as Morgan carried his insensible burden inside and deposited her on a brass four-poster bed covered with a handmade Danish quilt. Then the man, removing his Keevil to display a balding dome which, with his brown spade beard, lent him a somewhat distinguished air, said respectfully:

"What happened? Is she—hurt bad?"

Before Morgan could answer, a man in shirt sleeves hurried into the room, carrying a doctor's black satchel. At his heels was Hedwiga Solvang, face pale as marble as she passed Morgan without seeming to notice him, and fell on her knees at her mother's bedside.

"Oh, Mother, Mother! I should never have let you go!"

Morgan caught the eye of the medico who was preparing to lay out his medical paraphernalia on a bedside stand.

"Her horse fell on her," Morgan said. "She has two compound fractures. I—I splinted them as best I could, back in the hills. It happened three days ago."

The doctor nodded, muttering something as he put a stethescope to his patient's chest, then said, "Heddy, I'll need boiled towels and hot water."

The girl got to her feet, face taut as she faced Morgan. He said gently, "I'll go fetch the baby," and hurried out of the bedroom.

The frock-coated man who seemed to have taken charge matched his stride as Morgan headed along the corridor.

"Sorry to make a nuisance of myself," he said, following Morgan through the outer lobby where the porch crowd was now gathered around the fireplace, mute in the presence of a tragedy none of them could understand. "But you see, I—I feel responsible for whatever may have happened to the Solvangs. It was a foolish wager on my part that sent them to the Deck."

Wayne Morgan headed outdoors without speaking. This well-dressed stranger then would be Phil Webster, the engineer who was stringing the telegraph line over the Pass to Santa Barbara. Morgan decided the man would have his chance to talk later tonight.

CHAPTER IV

Questions and Answers

AT MIDNIGHT Wayne Morgan sat in the Solvang Hotel dining room enjoying the first meal he had eaten indoors since he and Blue Hawk had left Nevada nearly a month ago.

The doctor had given Mrs. Solvang a sedative and had made his departure a few minutes ago, reasonably well satisfied that his patient would recover without permanent lameness.

"Young man," Dr. Mulvaney had said, "you should have been a doctor yourself. I have never seen a better sample of first-aid in the field. If Mrs. Solvang walks again—which I am sure she will—she will owe it to your splinting skill."

There had been no point in disclaiming any part in the first aid work for which Blue Hawk had been solely responsible. Morgan had merely nodded his thanks to the doctor's tribute, his mind on the hard chore ahead of having to break to Heddy Solvang the news of her father's death.

He had been bluntly frank, talking to Heddy in the privacy of the room adjoining her mother's. Tomorrow, when Grandma Solvang recovered consciousness, Morgan knew she would give her

daughter full details of the ambush attack on the Hurricane Deck.

The girl had taken the news like a thoroughbred. In a crib in a far corner of the room, little Ingrid was sleeping peacefully. The miracle of the baby's deliverance seemed to off-set, to some degree, the tragedy that had overtaken Holger Solvang.

"Might I ask if you know of any reason whatever why your parents should have been attacked?" Morgan wanted to know, when the girl had recovered from her first shock and grief.

Heddy shook her head slowly. "Dad had no enemies, Mr. Morgan. We are not rich. No one could have wanted my parents out of the way for any money they had."

Wayne Morgan framed his next question carefully in his head before uttering it: "I understand you are planning to marry one of your father's stage drivers?"

"Yes. Larry Gabler."

"Could I talk to Larry? Perhaps he could shed some light on this thing."

Heddy shook her head. She was staring off into space while her hands twisted in her lap the lace-trimmed Danish apron she wore.

"Larry has been away for a week. He went up to San Luis Obispo to see about buying another Concord from a stage line that went broke when the railroad came down the coast. He's not back yet."

Morgan felt his pulses racing. Could Gabler have taken a side trip into the San Raphael Mountains on his way to the northern city—with death as his mission?

"Larry was due back here yesterday, whether or not he was the successful bidder for the stage-coach," Heddy Solvang went on. "But when he comes, I am sure he will be as—as mystified as I am about this terrible thing, Mr. Morgan.

As soon as the doctor had left the hotel, Heddy had gone about preparing a meal for the gaunt-faced stranger in rangeland garb to whom she owed such a tremendous debt of gratitude.

There were many more things Morgan wished to discuss with the girl, but they would have to wait. He understood her desire to remain all night at her mother's bedside.

Enjoying his solitary meal, Morgan heard the dining room door open and glanced up to see Philip Webster, the telegraph company engineer, moving into the room and closing the sliding panel door behind him.

In the glare of light from the ceiling chandelier, the engineer appeared younger than he had in the dimly lit lobby. Rounding the table, Webster pulled back a chair and sat down, reaching to a crystal bowl to pluck a grape from an arrangement of fruit.

"As I told you earlier this evening, sir," he said at once to Morgan somberly, "I feel somewhat responsible for this tragic thing. You see, the Solvangs went into the mountains to try and win a wager I made in a moment of jest—"

MORGAN spooned sugar into his coffee cup, his eyes putting their flat strike on Webster's bearded, handsome face. This man facing him was well educated, and the polish of social station was marked by his well-kept hands and the immaculate linen he wore. His eyes, wide-set to bracket an aquiline nose, regarded Morgan with an unblinking candor.

"I know," Morgan said. "You wanted proof that condors grew to unbelievable dimensions here in California. You would have lost that bet had Holger Solvang lived to collect it, Mr. Webster."

Webster stiffened, a vein bulging on his receding forehead. It was obvious that he had not been told of Holger's death.

"You mean—Mr. Solvang is dead?"

"Shot off his horse from ambush."

Webster's face suddenly took on a polish of oozing sweat. He removed a linen handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat and patted his cheeks with it.

"Why," he exclaimed, "that make me little better than a killer myself!"

Morgan eyed the engineer across the rim of his cup.

"But surely you have an alibi for your

whereabouts at the time the Solvangs were away condor-hunting."

Into Webster's eyes came a shocked expression. "As a mater of fact, I am just back from four days spent at my field camp. But—great Scott! Are you insinuating that I actually killed Solvang, Mr. —Mr.—"

"Morgan—Wayne Morgan. I am insinuating nothing of the kind, Mr. Webster. After all, to save paying a picayune wager is hardly sufficient motive to kill a man."

Webster's teeth crunched on grape seeds. His cheeks held a high flush of anger now. His voice came in a grating whisper:

"Morgan—if that is your real name—it strikes me as strange that *you* were so conveniently on hand to bring Mrs. Solvang and the baby out of the Deck country. What were you doing up there?"

Morgan set down his cup and returned Webster's drilling stare. It needled him, to have this suave man question him, the questions having such an acute bearing on Morgan's own safety.

"Let us say I was prospecting." He smiled enigmatically. "I understand you are building a telegraph line to Santa Barbara, Mr. Webster?"

The engineer nodded, the malevolent shine in his eyes deepening. "That is true. It is my intention eventually to link San Francisco and the Los Angeles area by wire. Why do you ask?"

Morgan shrugged, sliding back his chair and standing up.

"I was thinking perhaps you should telegraph Santa Barbara and have the sheriff come over tomorrow to question me," Morgan said. "Perhaps I *am* an owlhooter with a bounty on my head—since the Deck country is known to be a sanctuary for such. Perhaps that is why I risked my neck to bring an injured woman and a baby back to civilization."

Phil Webster coughed apologetically. He stood up, following Morgan around the table toward the lobby doors.

"I beg your pardon most humbly, Morgan," he said contritely. "You must forgive me for anything I said just now. You see, even though I am only a boarder here at the hotel, I—I have acquired a deep affection for Mr. and Mrs. Solvang."

Morgan opened the sliding doors and stepped out into the lobby. He was grinning now.

"Forget it, Webster. And forgive me for not having thought to hack the wing off a dead condor and bring it out with me, to satisfy your curiosity as a naturalist."

With that subtle rebuke, Wayne Morgan turned away and headed out into the night to see about stabling his horses.

His stable chores finished, Morgan shouldered his saddle-bags and returned to the hotel. As he was signing his name in the untended guest register, a square of cardboard tacked to the wall behind the clerk's counter caught his attention.

The nature of that sign put a ripple down Morgan's back. It was a reward dodger, the text only too familiar to him. Two-inch-high letters read:

$2,000 REWARD DEAD OR ALIVE FOR THE CAPTURE OF THE MASKED RIDER

IT WAS followed by a hazy description of the most-wanted fugitive in the West.

Rides coal-black stallion, 16 hands high
No brand
Wears black domino mask, cape, Stetson
Black-butted Colt 45s. Black gun harness
Age: unknown
Height: over six feet
Weight: around 185
Eyes said to be brown by those who claim to have seen them.
Invariably travels with Yaqui Indian known to be a ruthless killer
These outlaws are definitely believed to be hiding in southern California as of this date.
For information, consult your nearest law enforcement agency

Morgan felt someone at his side. He turned, to see the engineer, Webster, at his elbow. Webster took a mellow Cuban cigar from his teeth and said casually:

"That blazer was posted only yesterday, Mr. Morgan. You know, it suggests a most interesting line of thought to me—that 'Masked Rider' masquerade."

"It does?" Morgan asked.

"Yes. It calls to mind that this extra-

ordinary outlaw must undoubtedly do most of his moving around the frontier *without* his disguise. One wonders—is the Masked Rider young or old? Is he light or dark? American or alien?"

Morgan stooped to pick up his saddlebags. He was aware that Webster, behind his screening cigar smoke, was peering at the signature in the hotel register with a sharp interest.

Wayne Morgan
Alamogordo, N.M. Terr.

"The answer to those questions, Mr. Webster," Morgan drawled, "would be worth two thousand dollars to any bounty hunter."

The telepgraph man smiled quizzically. It was impossible to know if there was a double meaning back of his soft-spoken words.

"Of course, the key clue to the Masked Rider, the weak chink in his armor, is the fact that he invariably is accompanied by a Yaqui Indian. The Masked Rider himself could easily assume another rôle, without his mask and black regalia. Not so the red man."

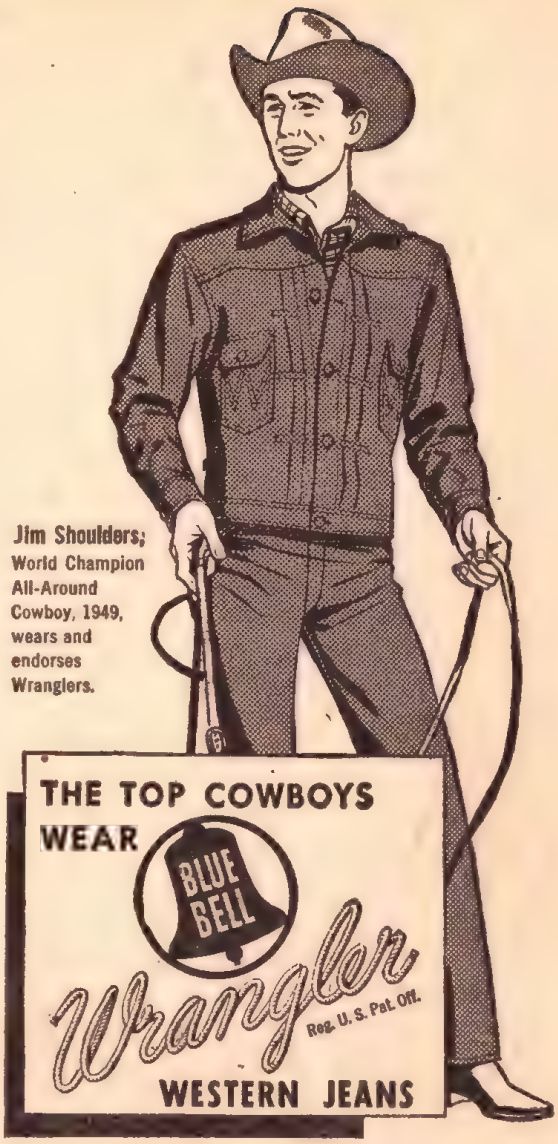
Morgan shrugged and headed up the carpeted stairway toward Room 29, which Heddy Solvang had reserved for him earlier in the evening.

He was aware that Webster's drilling stare was fixed on his back as he climbed the stairs.

Webster's seemingly idle comments had plucked Morgan's over-taut nerves more violently than the man could guess from the cowboy's calm outward appearance. As he headed down the dimly lighted hallway in search of Room 29, a disturbing thought occurred to him. Perhaps tomorrow, Philip Webster would call at Grandma Solvang's bedside to pay his respects. And it would be the most natural thing in the world for her to mention that her rescuer, Wayne Morgan, had left behind him in the mountains a full-blooded Indian partner.

Morgan closed the door of his corner room on the second floor of the hotel, and bolted it. A hobnailed lamp burned low

[*Turn page*]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on a table beside the bed; the quilts were turned back to expose snowy linen sheets and pillows, luxuries that were rare in Morgan's nomadic life.

Another door, open now, led to the upper deck of the double porch which flanked three sides of the building. The single window, across the room from that door, overlooked the stage barn and stock corrals out back.

The unpapered walls gave off a smell of resin, baked from the clapboards by the heat of the summer sun during the long day just past. But that would not interfere with his rest, not after the strain of the day's trek out of the San Raphaels. Not even his somewhat uneasy thoughts of Phil Webster could keep him from getting the sleep he needed so badly.

He blew out the lamp after, from careful habit, memorizing the layout of the furniture in the room. There was a full moon. Through his window he could see off across the roofs of Santa Ynez settlement to the whitewashed adobe bell tower of the mission built by the Franciscan *padres* in 1804.

He had heard the mellow voices of the bells ringing the Angelus, from afar this evening.

Before heading for bed, he moved over to the window and looked out on the moon-dappled yard. Leading up the clapboard wall from the ground was a ladder, built into the building, probably as an egress for the hotel guests in case of fire. Similar ladders were under each window of the hotel.

Going to the porch door, Morgan looked up and down the railed gallery fronting the stage-coach station. Anyone in any of the six front rooms up here had access to that double porch.

In other words, Wayne Morgan realized that it would be easy for any prowler to enter his room at will. He had bolted the inner door, but this door was hooked back during the summer time for ventilation. To close it, or the window, would be to sacrifice any thought of comfort while he slept.

Morgan decided against it.

CHAPTER V

The Cinnamon Sombrero

WAYNE MORGAN went over to the bed, sat down, and shucked off his kangaroo cowboots, chaps, and hickory shirt. He hung his gun-belts handy on a bedpost, then from one of his saddle-bags he drew a spool of the thin-gauge silken fishline he and Blue Hawk invariably carried with them. There was nothing like fresh trout to augment a man's grub supply out in the wilds. Now the fishline would serve another purpose.

Making no sound in his sock feet, Morgan walked over to the porch door. He tied one end of the fishline to a hinge, carrying the line across the opening at the height of a man's belt and looping it around the brass strike of the door jamb.

His next move was to thread the fishline through the curved porcelain handle of the empty water pitcher which stood on a marble-topped bureau in one corner. He drew the fishline taut, then pulled the china pitcher across the top of the slab until it was delicately balanced, overhanging the edge.

The rest of the fishline he ran across the room to the open window, hooking it over a nail in the window casing which had been put there so the gauze curtains could be tied back. The fishline stretched across the open window a foot above the sill and Morgan tied the end of it securely to a similar nail on the opposite casing.

He stepped back then, to survey his handiwork. Satisfied, he turned in.

Drowsiness came swiftly as he let the tension ease from his muscles. In a room down the hall he could hear a mumble of voices as a group of Mexicans—pole setters from Webster's telegraph crew, probably—played a late game of monte.

He could hear the remote trill of insects out in the sycamores, the honking of bullfrogs along the river. He was thinking of Blue Hawk, out in the moon-gilded

mountain night when sleep overcame him.

Down in the lobby a mantel clock chimed the hours of two, two-thirty, three, three-thirty, four.

The splintering crash of the water pitcher striking the floor after its drop off the bureau brought Wayne Morgan out of deep slumber with every nerve and fiber of his being tinglingly awake.

He reared up on the bed, right hand stabbing out to snatch a cedar-stocked Colt revolver from holster.

Limned in the moonlit rectangle of the window ten feet from the bed were the head and shoulders of a man who was straddling the window sill. The silhouette of a man wearing a cone-peaked sombrero, the sweeping brim of which kept the moonlight from touching the angles of his cheek and ear and jaw.

Morgan was rolling out of bed, thumb-earing the six-gun hammer to full cock, when the intruder gave a grunt of dismay and reared back, withdrawing his leg from the sill.

Before Morgan could gather himself to spring at the shape in that window, the prowler dropped from sight. But with his swift movement the high crown of his sombrero struck the lower frame of the raised sash, toppled from his head and fell forward into the room.

It took Wayne Morgan less than five seconds to cross the room and lean from the window. Moonlight made a blue flashing along his Colt barrel as he thrust it outside.

He was in time to see the prowler hit the ground, having jumped from half-way up the ladder. The moon glinted on the naked steel of a long-bladed knife in the fellow's fist as, with incredible speed, he recovered and sprinted out of sight in the dense shadow of a live-oak tree overhanging the roof at the corner.

It would be foolish to climb down the ladder in pursuit, Morgan knew. He would make a prime target against the whitewashed pine clapboards.

He withdrew from the window and laid his gun aside. The water pitcher, jerked off its precarious balance by the prowler's chest hitting the invisible fishline, lay in fractured shards all over the floor.

MORGAN wondered if the crash had roused anyone else in the hotel. At least it had saved him from a knife blade between the ribs.

A slow breath—the one he had pulled into his lungs at the instant of his abrupt awakening — leaked through Morgan's pressure-whitened lips now. He groped in the shadow under the window until his hands encountered the sombrero.

Holding it into the shaft of moonlight, he saw it to be a Mexican sombrero of woven maguay fiber, dyed a bright cinnamon color, a distinctive reddish-brown. It was a cheap *pelado* hat, of the sort costing only a few pesetas at any native store in southern California.

Its leather sweatband held the lingering warmth of its owner's flesh. The band carried no identifying initial, only a sweat-faded label, "*Ruiz Cantina, Estado y Cota, Sta Barbara,*" a store catering to Californios, no doubt, where these two-bit straw sombreros were stacked by the gross.

Still perhaps, Morgan mused, this sombrero might possibly be turned to some use. In his wild haste to get back down the ladder the knife-toting prowler might not know just what had happened to his hat, so he might make a search for it.

Rummaging in a pocket of his levis, Wayne Morgan located a stub of indelible pencil. Inverting the cinnamon-colored sombrero, Morgan rubbed the indelible tip of the pencil around the bottom edge of the sweat-soggy leather band.

The pencil marks did not show on the dark background of the leather. But once they were subjected to a wearer's body heat, the leather moistened by perspiration, the indelible pencil marks were almost certain to leave a distinctive purple smudge on the wearer's skin.

Wayne Morgan stepped to the window and let the hat fall. The wind caught it, planing it to the hard-rammed earth fifteen feet below and two yards away from the hotel wall.

Back in his bed, Morgan rolled a ciga-

rette, trying to figure this thing out. His watch hands stood at 4:16. The prowler had timed his attack to take advantage of that pre-dawn blackness when a sleeper's vitality is at its ebb. Morgan's thoughts were still on the hat.

"The man who wore that sombrero could have been one of Webster's wire-stringers or post-hole diggers," he thought, recalling the group of swarthy laborers who had been sitting on the porch upon his arrival at the Solvang stage-coach hotel. "It could have been Webster himself, wearing that sombrero in order to leave a false clue behind for whoever found my body."

Morgan drifted off to sleep without knowing it. The pinched-out cigarette stub was still in his fingers when he awakened, at six o'clock sharp, to the sound of rattling dishes in the dining room below.

He got out of bed, walked over to the window and looked out. The cinnamon-colored straw sombrero was gone. Had Heddy or some early-rising hotel guest discovered it, picked it up? Had its owner come back, hunting it? Or had a vagrant wind sent it kiting away across the yard?

Morgan shrugged. What was more important to him than answers to those questions was that the bright sunlight of this new day revealed not the slightest vestige of the prowler's foot prints on the hard-baked gumbo below.

When he had finished dressing, Wayne Morgan went out onto the upper-story porch to investigate the noise of wagon wheels on the road outside the hotel. He was hoping that Heddy's fiancé, Larry Gabler, was returning from San Luis Obispo with a new Concord.

The noisy vehicle, however, proved to be a red-painted Shuttlers work wagon heavily loaded with telegraph poles, drawn by a six-horse hitch of fine-looking Percherons. A Mexican teamster was seated atop the heavy load of poles, and behind the Shuttlers were about fifteen American and Mexican laborers on horseback.

"Webster's construction gang," Morgan told himself, scrutinizing each rider in turn as they reined alongside the halted pole wagon.

A WRY grin touched Wayne Morgan's lips as he counted no less than eleven straw sombreros dyed cinnamon color. Some itinerant peddler must have accosted the telepgraph crew out in the Pass and sold them identical summer headgear.

The crew was engaging in boisterous early-morning banter, English and Spanish mingling, when Phil Webster emerged from the hotel, lighting an after-breakfast cigar. The telegraph boss no longer wore his dandified city clothes; he was dressed for a hard day's work in San Marcos Pass, his garb consisting of his Keevil hat, a blue ducking jumper, and faded whipcord pants tucked into high-laced boots of the type favored by mountaineers or surveyors.

"More, Daddy!"

From around the corner of the hotel came a tall Mexican, likewise wearing a cinnamon-hued straw sombrero, a greasy

charro jacket, and incredibly dirty and patched gaucho pants. The Mexican was leading two horses, a fine palomino gelding with a silver-trimmed saddle, and a shad-bellied bay saddled with a dish-horned double-rigged California kak.

The Mexican handed the palomino's reins to Webster. Morgan, peering down from the hotel gallery, heard the telegraph boss grunt, "Thanks, Primotivo," and saw him climb into stirrups. Primotivo mounted and lifted a hand to signal the other riders and the wagon driver, thereby establishing his status as a foreman or *segundo* to Webster, in Morgan's mind.

None of the telegraph workers glanced up at Morgan as they got under way, flanking the pole wagon. The teamster headed his draft horses out to follow Webster and Primotivo in the direction of the San Marcos Pass stage road.

Morgan cleaned up the mess of broken porcelain before leaving his room and going downstairs. He found Heddy Solvang clearing the dishes off the dining table in the crew's mess hall off the lobby.

The girl's eyes lighted up as she saw Morgan.

"You should have slept late," she chided him. "I hope Mr. Webster's telegraph crew didn't wake you up with their noise."

A lone customer was eating breakfast at the table—a clean-cut young man in his twenties, a shock of brick-red hair and freckles to match. Heddy Solvang, her arms loaded with her tray of dishes, indicated him with a toss of her head as she said:

"Mr. Morgan, this is my future husband, Larry Gabler. Larry, this is the gentleman who saved Mother and Ingie for us."

Larry Gabler stood up, his amber eyes shining as he stepped away from the table to shake hands with Morgan. Morgan put a lot of importance in the way a man shook hands, and Gabler's hearty grip impressed him favorably, as did the young stage tooler's appearance in general.

"Howdy, Gabler." Morgan grinned. "Just get in?"

Gabler shook his head. "Made it back around one o'clock last night—had a breakdown this side of La Purissima Mission and had to leave a stage-coach on the road."

Morgan's grin faded. It seemed impossible that this frank, friendly young man could have had anything to do with the bushwhack attack on Holger Solvang up in the San Raphaels. But Heddy would inherit the San Marcos stage line and Larry Gabler was going to marry her. He at least had a motive for wanting the elder Solvangs out of the way.

"Heddy told me—about Holger—and what you did for us," Gabler was saying, his face grave now. "It is a shocking thing, what Grandma and little Ingrid went through. They owe their lives to you and your partner."

CHAPTER VI

"Out of the Mouths of Babes—"

IT SEEMED to Morgan that Larry Gabler had hesitated ever so slightly before voicing his last word. It was as if he had almost said "redskinned" before he said "partner."

"I did no more than any man would have done, Mr. Gabler," Morgan said. "How is Mrs. Solvang this morning?"

Gabler drew out a chair at the table for Morgan and resumed his own seat.

"Haven't talked to her," he said, "but Dr. Mulvaney was here just after sunrise and said she was sleeping peacefully and that her fever seems to have abated. We'll be hearing from little Ingie, though. She's an early riser, bless her little heart."

Morgan poured himself a cup of coffee. He did not miss Gabler's tone of voice as he mentioned the baby, and he said gently, "You think a lot of that little towhead, don't you?"

"I love her as if she were my own," Gabler declared. "And she will be. Heddy and I plan to adopt her legally, soon as we're married."

In that moment, Wayne Morgan lost the last vestiges of any half-formed suspicion of Gabler. This man could not have left that baby to die in the mountains. Gabler had had nothing to do with that monstrous crime on the Deck.

Heddy came in with a platter of steaming buckwheats.

"Mama's awake, and hungry as a bear," she said. "But Ingie is still asleep, poor little soul."

Pouring molasses on his cakes, Wayne Morgan inquired casually, "The man they call Primotivo—does he sleep here, or at some field camp in the Pass?"

Heddy said, "Primotivo? Oh, you mean Gonzales, Mr. Webster's foreman. He sleeps here, Mr. Morgan. All the telegraph men do."

"Is he a local man?" Morgan asked.

Gabler answered for Heddy. "No, he's not a Barbareno—or 'barbarian,' as we call the Santa Barbara natives. Webster's been building the telegraph line down from 'Frisco over a period of eighteen months or so. He hired his crew up north."

Gabler, finished with breakfast, stood up.

"I've got to hustle back to my stalled coach," he said. "By the way, Morgan, when do you expect your partner? Or is he remaining at the Hurricane Deck?"

Morgan felt his pulses speed up. "We're prospecting," he said. "I'll be rejoining him in the mountains shortly."

Gabler shrugged. "Just wondered. Phil Webster seemed much interested when I told him—or Heddy told him, rather—that you traveled with an Indian."

Morgan met Gabler's gaze. Was this stage Jehu trying to warn him of some danger from Webster?

"Webster," Morgan said, "overdoes his curiosity. His interest in condors, for example. This tragedy would never have happened if Webster had not been a roomer here."

Gabler nodded, donned his flat-crowned Stetson, and left the dining room. Out front, a stage driver's copper bugle made its raucous signal, indicating that a Solvang stage was leaving shortly for Santa Barbara.

"Webster knows I travel with an Indian," Morgan mused, suddenly losing his appetite for breakfast. "That man has the stink of a bounty-hunter about him."

Morgan was heading down the corridor when he saw Heddy Solvang emerging from her mother's room with a tray of dishes.

"Her ordeal didn't do anything to Mother's appetite," the girl assured, and laughed.

"Could—that is, is Mrs. Solvang seeing visitors yet?" Morgan asked.

Heddy's blue eyes smiled. "As a matter of fact, the first thing she wanted to know this morning was whether that nice-looking young man had remained here overnight. She was afraid you had gone back to the mountains."

Knocking on Mrs. Solvang's door, Morgan heard a "Come in!" Entering the bedroom, he saw the grandmother propped up on pillows, a coverlet thrown over her splinted leg.

Mrs. Solvang's face showed the pain she had endured, but in spite of the grief for her husband she was still enduring, her eyes were bright and there was a smile on her lips as she extended her blue-veined hands toward Morgan.

"Young man, did I get around to thanking you for saving my worthless life—and little Ingie's worthwhile one?"

MORGAN nodded, realizing that for Mrs. Solvang, most of their journey out of the San Raphael's was but a shadowy void.

"You certainly did, Grandma," he declared. "With thanks entirely unnecessary." His face became grave and thoughtful. He said, "Mrs. Solvang, I have a favor to ask of you. Do you remember the Indian who was with me?"

Grandma Solvang nodded, and blinked back unbidden tears. "He remained on the ridge, didn't he—to see if he could find any clues as to who killed Holger?"

Morgan nodded also. "I would appreciate it," he said, "if you would not men-

tion my Indian *compadre* in discussing your tragedy with anyone. Mr. Gabler knows about him from Heddy, of course. But—"

Morgan broke off, uncertain how to explain Blue Hawk.

"I know," Grandma Solvang said gently. "I've seen the reward posters about the Masked Rider and the Indian who rides with him. You're afraid folks might jump to conclusions and think *you* are the Masked Rider, since he and his Indian are known to be hiding somewhere in southern California."

Meeting the old woman's level gaze, Morgan could not be sure what her secret thoughts were; but he knew that whatever they were, he could trust her to the ends of the earth, and not merely because she was heavily in his debt.

"Even if you were the Masked Rider," the Danish woman went on, her voice gentle. "It would be all the same to me, young man. I know he has an evil reputation that is a legend in the West. But I have also heard that he helps people more than he harms them. And whoever his Indian friend may be, I am sure that that red man is no fiendish savage."

Morgan felt oddly humbled, but before he could answer, the door opened and Baby Ingrid toddled into the room, droll-looking in her old-fashioned Danish sleeping garment. At sight of Morgan she ran to him, hugged and kissed him.

After kissing her grandmother, the child turned her wide blue gaze back to Wayne Morgan and said in deep earnestness, "Baby want big hat like big man."

Morgan's glance shot to Mrs. Solvang, who asked curiously, "What hat? What big man are you talking about, dear?"

The child squirmed shyly. "Big man come when Gramma asleep, pony asleep. Baby cry. Big man go 'way. Baby want hat."

Over the little girl's head, the eyes of Wayne Morgan and the old woman met in dawning understanding.

"She must mean one of the ambushers came down the ridge while I was unconscious," Grandma Solvang whispered. "I recall now—it had slipped my mind—how she kept talking about a big hat, after I came to."

Morgan's thoughts were racing. "Tell us more about the man in the big hat, honey," he said. "What kind of a hat was it—do you know?"

He asked without much thought of getting any answer that could be of use to him, and was amazed when the baby promptly pounced on the patchwork quilt over her grandmother's knees. A pudgy little finger pushed into a patch in the quilt—a piece a decided cinnamon color!

"Hat like that!" she said, laughing triumphantly. "Hat big—pretty—red! Baby want red hat."

Wayne Morgan was devoutly thankful for this ocular demonstration of what Baby Ingrid considered red.

"And the big man, honey?" he asked eagerly.

But Ingrid's mind already had strayed to other things, the shiny rowels on Wayne Morgan's spurs getting her full attention.

Heddy came in and took her out to breakfast. Morgan looked at the old woman on the bed and said, "Can I trust you with a secret, ma'am?"

Grandma Solvang's eyes lighted up. "An old biddy like me loves a secret, son."

Morgan said, "A man wearing a cinnamon-colored hat, a big sombrero, tried to kill me in Room Twenty-nine at four o'clock this morning. I have reason to believe he works for Webster's telegraph crew."

A DEADLY seriousness came into the old woman's eyes.

"Then you must leave at once. It is not fair for you to run any risk on my behalf."

Morgan shook his head.

"Before the day is over, Mrs. Solvang, I hope to prove beyond doubt who wears that hat Ingrid told us about. When I do, I may have your husband's killer. I do not intend to leave Santa Ynez until I have done that—and also have found out why you were trailed into the mountains and attacked."

After a few more minutes with Grandma Solvang, Wayne Morgan left the hotel and went out to the horse barn to saddle up his hammerhead roan. In a side yard next to the blacksmith shop Larry Gabler was busy assembling tools and stage-coach parts with which to repair his broken-down Concord, left overnight on the San Luis Obispo road.

Morgan's own plan was to find Blue Hawk, who had had time to reach Santa Ynez by now. The Yaqui would be somewhere near the valley's best-known landmark, the old Spanish Mission.

In saddle, Wayne Morgan headed through Santa Ynez. Daylight revealed the village to be very small indeed, consisting of two saloons, a livery stable, a mercantile store, schoolhouse, and a scattering of homes. On the western outskirts of the settlement was the Franciscan mission, now in ruins, which was one of the chain of twenty-one churches built by the Spaniards between San Diego and Sonoma between 1770 and 1823.

The mission appeared deserted as Morgan headed along the Lompoc wagon road skirting the edifice. The remains of two reservoirs, fed by an ancient conduit linked to the Santa Ynez River several miles southward, were now overgrown with brush and weeds.

A line of new telegraph poles marched across the open ground where Indian neophytes, under the supervision of the brown-cassocked friars, had once tilled their fields.

Nodes of iron wire looped from pole to pole. This would be Phil Webster's new telegraph line, heading southeastward into the great gap of the San Marcos Pass.

Beyond the mission *campo santo* and untended fruit orchards the Lompoc road snaked its way through a dense stand of live-oaks and chaparral. Reaching the outskirts of the timbered area, Wayne Morgan slowed his roan to a walk, and his lips puckered in the eerie call of the wild curlew. That was the signal he and Blue Hawk used when for any reason it was not advisable to use their more familiar one—the call of a mountain lion.

Almost at once, from a brushy thicket of manzanita and buckthorn scrub, came an answered bird call. Morgan swung off the Lompoc wagon road and sent the roan plunging into the underbrush.

He had covered fifty yards of thorny jungle when another curlew sound steered him due south. Reaching a small, densely-shaded clearing, he reined up, and Blue Hawk materialized from behind a thicket of flowering yucca, a rifle in his hand, his coppery flesh gleaming in the filtered sunlight.

Blue Hawk gestured, then turned and threaded his way back into the cactus patch. Wayne Morgan, following, saw his black stallion, Midnight, cropping grass in the deep shade. The pinto, stripped of pack-saddle, was on picket a short distance away.

Morgan dismounted. Visibility was limited to a few feet in this thorny covert. Blue Hawk had chosen his hideout well.

"You have news for me, Hawk?" Morgan asked.

The Yaqui nodded. From a pocket of his drill pants he took the collection of objects he had found on the ridge overlooking the site of the Solvang bushwhack attack, miles away on the lofty crown of the San Raphaels.

CHAPTER VII

A Rattler Strikes

HUNKERED down, Morgan studied the brass cartridge cases and the yellow and black tin disk from a plug of tobacco which his Yaqui *compadre* had found. The cigarette, hand-rolled, was of little value to him; but the empty cartridges were a discovery of great importance.

"Most men carry forty-five-seventy Springfields, or thirty-thirty Winchesters in this part of the country, Hawk," he said. "You have done well. Rifles bored for slugs as large as fifty-four caliber should be easily identified."

Midnight, the big demon black which Morgan rode in his rôle of the Masked Rider, came over to nuzzle his rider's cheek. Morgan gave the big black a lump of sugar he had filched at breakfast, and turned back to his examination of Blue Hawk's clues.

"*El Puesta del Sol* cut plug is a Mexican favorite," he went on. "It is a brand seldom chewed by gringos. This tiny hunk of tin may put some peon's neck in a noose yet, Hawk."

The Indian shrugged. "How is the senora?" he asked.

Tersely, Wayne Morgan described the events of the past day and night since he left Blue Hawk in the mountains. The Indian showed special interest in Morgan's appraisal of the telegraph boss, Phil Webster, and of Heddy Solvang's stage-driving fiancé, Larry Gabler.

"This valley has been put on the alert for the Masked Rider and his Indian *compadre*, Hawk," Morgan warned. "It might be a good idea to keep Midnight saddled and the packs on the pinto, in case you have to move in a hurry."

Morgan stepped into oxbow stirrups, waved farewell to the red man, and within a matter of moments was lost to Blue Hawk's view as he headed back out of the brush. Minutes later Hawk glimpsed his partner headed back toward the Santa Ynez Mission and Webster's telegraph poles.

Realizing the wisdom of Morgan's advice in having his livestock in instant readiness for a quick move, Blue Hawk saddled Midnight and reloaded the pack pony. It was not necessary to picket the two animals while he slept.

The Indian withdrew into a leafy grotto of wild berry bushes, spread out a saddle blanket and lay down. His rifle and yew-wood hunting bow, with a quiver of arrows, lay handy at his side in case of emergency.

Blue Hawk was soon asleep, but his primitive instincts could be depended upon to rouse him at the slightest hint of danger.

Midnight, cropping grass near a scatter of loose rocks, was unaware of the four-foot diamondback rattlesnake which was sunning itself amid those rocks. The reptiles were common to this region, but were of a torpid variety, lethargic by nature.

But this snake was shedding, the most lethal cycle in the species. As the black stallion's muzzle came within range of its deadly fangs, the diamondback whipped itself into a coil, tail buzzing, and cocked its pitted coffin-shaped head to strike.

Midnight was trained not to flinch at the explosion of gunfire or any major emergency. But now, without a hand at his reins, the stallion's innate terror of snakes panicked the black.

Rearing away from the reptile's rapier-swift strike, the stallion bolted through the brush, trumpeting in alarm. It brought Blue Hawk leaping to his feet.

In wild flight, Midnight crashed through the chaparral and emerged from the live-oaks onto an open road. He nearly collided with a rider who was trailing five harnessed Percherons.

Larry Gabler was as startled by the black horse's sudden emergence on the Lompoc road as the stallion was. Gabler's thoughts at the moment had been chiefly concerned with the new responsibilities which Holger Solvang's death had put upon his shoulders.

Now, seeing the beautiful black saddler skid to a halt directly alongside him, the young stage-coach Jehu jumped to the conclusion that the stallion must have thrown its rider somewhere back in the brush, between this road and the Santa Ynez River.

ACTING on pure impulse, Gabler flung himself from saddle and seized Midnight's trailing reins, his weight pulling the trumpeting stallion to a halt. He hitched him to a tree.

A pair of tooled leather *alforja* bags were strapped to the black's saddle. On a hunch that he might be able to identify the stallion's owner by studying the contents of the saddlebags, Gabler reached for the nearest pouch and unbuckled the

the strap with which it was fastened.

A moment later he felt his veins icing. From the saddle-bag he drew a folded black Stetson, to the chin cord of which was attached a black domino mask. Neatly folded in the lower part of the saddle-bag was a sable-hued cape of expensive woolen material.

"The Masked Rider's clothes!"

Gabler breathed the words in a hoarse whisper, as if not daring to speak aloud. And this black stallion was the famous Midnight!

With feverish haste, Gabler stuffed the outlaw disguise back into the saddle-bags and cinched the straps tight. Then, with an apprehensive glance into the chaparral from which the black had bolted, Gabler hurried back to his waiting team and vaulted into saddle.

Spurring into a gallop, Gabler rushed his harnessed team on down the road and out of sight of the stallion. When he was sure he could not be observed, Gabler leaped from saddle, urged his horse into a dead run. His harnessed horses vanished around a far turn of the road.

Gabler's pulses were pounding madly as he slipped into the brush and began working his way back toward the roadside tree where he had left the black tethered. Gabler had his Colt .44 palmed now.

Veering away from the road, he slithered on all fours to a point within twenty feet of the tree where Midnight stood impatiently, tail switching flies, forehoof pawing.

The following ten-minute wait was like an eternity to Larry Gabler. His fingers ached from the strain of clutching the checked rubber plates of his gunstock. He was running a grim risk, waiting for the Masked Rider to come hunting his mount. Perhaps the outlaw had been killed, or bucked off by the black and left injured somewhere; he might never show up.

And then, just as Gabler was beginning to think his vigil was useless, a blur of movement in a manzanita scrub flanking the Lompoc road caught his eye.

Out of that brush came a tall Indian. A single eagle plume jutted from jet-black hair worn in twin braids and girdled by a red beadwork bandeau. The redskin moved on moccasined feet as lithely as a stalking animal. There was a lever-action Winchester under his arm.

Gabler's head swam with excitement. The Masked Rider traveled with an Indian, the reward posters advertised! A Yaqui. And the two outlaws were supposed to be hiding somewhere here in southern California now. Down in Santa Barbara the saloons had buzzed with discussion about the Masked Rider, the last time Gabler was in town. The sheriff, Ross Ortega, had given Gabler a packet of Masked Rider reward posters to tack up at Kinevan Ranch relay station, Cold

Springs, and here in Santa Ynez only a week ago.

The Indian was cautiously approaching the black horse now, but his attention was on the road, in the direction taken by Gabler's team. The dust stirred up by the galloping horses still hung in the humid air in that direction.

The stage setting for this mantrap was realistic enough to deceive even an Indian as cagey as this Yaqui was reported to be. On the face of it, it appeared that some passing rider had dabbed a rope on the runaway black, tied it to this sapling, and then had ridden on, going on the assumption that the black's owner would eventually show up to claim his steed.

The Indian, moving with all the stealth of a lizard, stepped over to the tree and reached for the black's knotted reins.

COMING to his feet, Larry Gabler eared his revolver hammer back to full cock. At the sound of the double click of the Colt's mechanism, slight as it was, the Indian wheeled, his brown hand levering a shell into the breech of his carbine.

"Hold it or I'll shoot you down!"

The Indian's black eyes flashed as he saw Gabler come striding into the open behind a jutting gun.

Blue Hawk read the excitement in this white man's face, knew a whit more pressure on the man's Colt trigger could blast him into eternity. He tossed his Winchester to one side and raised his arms. He spoke in a guttural monotone:

"Why do you do this, senor?"

Gabler halted at arm's reach, his eyes running over the Yaqui to determine that he carried no belt weapon, other than a sheathed hunting knife.

"You are the Masked Rider's partner," Gabler said. "Do you deny it?"

Blue Hawk's immobile features did not betray his quick stab of apprehension.

"I no *sabe* what you say, senor."

Gabler flushed, not wanting to express the thought that had just struck him, yet feeling impelled to voice his suspicions.

"Then are you the partner of Wayne Morgan, the hombre who came down from the Hurricane Deck with the old woman and the baby girl yesterday?"

"You speak the riddle, senor," Blue Hawk muttered, playing the rôle of stupid *paisano*.

Gabler said, "I'm taking you to see Grandma Karen Solvang, to see if she can identify you. But no matter what she says, I am going to take you to the sheriff in Santa Barbara. At least I know this is the Masked Rider's horse. . . ."

In the meantime, Wayne Morgan was following the single line of telegraph poles into the San Marcos Pass. But they did not follow the survey pattern of most telegraph lines he had seen in the West.

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

A MERRY SMOKE—Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. THE LARGE SIZE CANISTER OF SIR WALTER RALEIGH—IN A BEAUTIFUL YULETIDE PACKAGE—MAKES THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS GIFT!

Telegraph wires usually took the shortest distance between two points. If a hill lay in the way, the poles would climb that hill, maintaining a straight line insofar as the topography of the ground made such an economy of distance possible.

But Phil Webster, in making his engineering survey out this mountain division of his telegraph line from San Francisco, seemed instead to have worked as a road grader might. Telegraph poles would follow the shoulder of a mountain ridge, climbing it at a three or four per cent grade.

Wayne Morgan was essentially a cowman. He made no pretentions of being a surveyor or an engineer. But on one ridge alone, at the north entrance of San Marcos Pass, he saw where Webster's telegraph line had covered over a mile of ground, using a total of fifty-seven poles, where he could have built over the same hogback at an expenditure of only twelve poles and an eighth of a mile of expensive wire.

"Something fishy in Denmark," Morgan muttered, as he dipped down into a canyon instead of following the long round-about switchback of the telegraph line. "Either Webster is padding his supply of materials, getting a rake-off from the firm which is furnishing him with wire and insulators, or else he and his crew are getting paid by the mile."

As he worked deeper into the Pass, Morgan noted something else which struck him as peculiar. The right-of-way stakes marking the telegraph company's easement were spaced sixty feet apart, where a ten-foot right-of-way would have been adequate for the construction and maintenance of a single telegraph line.

"More like a survey for a railroad than a telegraph line," Morgan thought, trying to puzzle the thing out. "Could it be possible that Webster's wire-stringing is a blind to cover up some more important enterprise?"

He knew that the only major railroad in this section of the country was the Southern Pacific, which followed the coast from Los Angeles to San Francisco. If Webster was an advance engineer for a competing railroad, he would be forced to survey a right-of-way different from that of the solidly-entrenched S.P. In that event, the San Marcos Pass offered a low-level route to Santa Barbara's coastal plain.

Morgan's puzzlement grew as, topping a thrust of high ground to save time, he saw where Webster had sent the poles straight up and over the ridge—a common practice with frontier telegraph builders. If Webster had chosen a short cut here, why had he laboriously by-passed all the other ridges?

To satisfy his curiosity, Morgan worked his horse down the south slope of the ridge until he came to the spot where the telegraph line made a right-angled turn along the slope of the ridge. Across the intervening ravine he saw where the telegraph poles continued their gentle upward-graded march along the opposite slope.

CHAPTER VIII

Owlhooter Evidence

DISMOUNTING, Wayne Morgan hunted around in the brush until he came to a sun-browned surveyor's stake marking the elbow bend of the right-of-way limits. Scribbled on the stake in an engineer's blue crayon was the cryptic inscription:

S. END TUN 18 ELEV 1876

"That could mean 'south end of Tunnel Eighteen, elevation one thousand eight hundred and seventy-six feet,'" Morgan muttered. "If 'tun' means tunnel, then Webster *is* mapping out a future railroad through the Pass. That would account for such a wide right-of-way."

The puzzle had assumed important proportions in Morgan's head now. What if Webster was working with or for a group of swindlers who were selling fake railroad stock to the citizens of California? Or if the plan for a competing railroad

to the Southern Pacific was actually under way, where did the killing of Holger Solvang fit in? Solvang had been running a stage-coach line, therefore might have been a competitor for the railroad. But why resort to such extremes to put a stage outfit out of business?

Morgan was still wrestling with the peculiar angles of Webster's telegraph survey when, around one o'clock, he came in sight of the crew working on a ridge to the south.

Over to the left he could see the cuts and fills of the stage road to Santa Barbara. Coming down the long grade toward the relay stop at Cold Springs was one of Solvang's red-bodied, yellow-wheeled Concords, north-bound for Santa Ynez.

A feeder road led off up a side canyon toward the site of the telegraph camp, showing Morgan how Webster's wagons reached the spot, freighting in poles and other equipment.

As Morgan approached the camp on the mountain slope, he saw that the crew had knocked off for the noon meal. A twenty-yard-wide swath had been cleared on ahead by advance gangs with axes and brush hooks.

Behind the right-of-way clearance gangs had gone the diggers and pole setters. Behind them the wiremen, installing insulators and stringing their iron cobweb from reel wagons.

Following a game trail toward the construction camp, Wayne Morgan saw that Webster's crew had been augmented by a dozen or more men than he had seen leaving Solvang's hotel this morning. That told him that Webster had another crew building line northward from Santa Barbara. The line must be nearing a junction point for the two crews to be eating at the same camp.

A few moments later the Robin Hood outlaw broke clear of the brush to reach the camp. To one side was a chuckwagon such as cattlemen used on the range during roundup season. A sweating Negro cook was busy at a cookfire, ladling soup into mess kits as the weary polesetters and wire stringers queued up for their noon grub.

Further up the hill was the Shuttlers wagon, half of the poles it carried unloaded—the wagon which had pulled out of Santa Ynez this morning.

A red-whiskered workman called a greeting to Wayne Morgan, assuming him to be a grubline rider drifting through the country. Morgan dismounted and off-saddled, scanning the vicinity for the boss, Phil Webster. The engineer was absent.

"Rustle up a spare mess kit for this stranger, Joe!" the red-bearded man instructed the white-aproned cook. "You look hongry, mister."

Morgan grinned his thanks and, accepting a tin cup, plate and knife and fork from the Negro cook, took his place in the grub line.

It was a hot day and most of the workmen were stripped to the waist. Cinnamon-hued straw hats Morgan saw in abundance; it was almost as if such sombreros were a uniform worn by Webster's crew.

When he reached the soup kettle, Morgan asked the cook, "Where's Senor Webster?"

The Negro gestured off up the ridge. "Boss ain't back yit, suh. He inspecting the other crew's work, Ah reckon."

Carrying his food, Morgan glanced around the camp. Workers were seated here and there in the shade of wagons or brush clumps, smoking and resting. At the far end of the chuckwagon, Morgan recognized Primotivo Gonzales, Webster's foreman.

PRIMOTIVO had his shirt off, his brown chest muscles gleaming with sweat. He was seated on the wagon tongue, busy consuming beans from a tin can. His cinnamon-colored hat was hanging over a single-tree behind him.

"Mind if I join you, senor?" Wayne Morgan addressed the *segundo* in Spanish.

Primotivo Gonzales glanced up, his indifferent stare turning to a start of surprise as he recognized Morgan.

"Ah—you are the senor who brought

the *vieja* down from thos' mountains, no?" Primotivo asked, as Morgan hunkered down beside him. "I saw you at the *posada* een Santa Ynez last night."

"That's right."

Morgan's glance flickered up to scan Primotivo's sweat-beaded forehead. Just under the man's jet-black hairline was a thin smudge of purple, like tattoo ink.

Wayne Morgan stirred his steaming coffee, his eyes staring off across the heat-shimmering expanse of the San Marcos Pass, as if he had nothing whatsoever on his mind.

But inwardly, Morgan was seething with excitement. Primotivo Gonzales was the owner of the sombrero with the hatband which Morgan had marked with indelible pencil last night in Room 29 at the Solvang Hotel. Webster's foreman, then, was in all probability the prowler who had attempted to invade his room just before dawn with a knife in his fist.

"Work going all right?" Morgan inquired conversationally.

Primotivo shrugged. A swollen vein on the foreman's temple was pounding at a rapid rate. "He's scared," Morgan thought. "He wonders if I suspect he's the hombre who tried to climb into my room last night."

Answering in Spanish, Gonzales said, "We tie in the wires from the north and the south soon, senor. Then the messages will get through from Santa Barbara to San Francisco for the first time."

"And then your job for Webster will be done?" Morgan asked idly.

"*Si*, so far as San Marcos is concerned. Then we go south of Santa Barbara with the wires."

Primotivo finished eating. He took a pocket knife from the pocket of his ragged gaucho pants, and from a pocket of his charro vest an almost finished plug of black chewing tobacco. Paring off a chew, Primotivo was tucking the tobacco into his cheek when Morgan asked,

"Mind if I try some of that tobacco, amigo? I'm out of makings."

Primotivo passed the plug over. Morgan saw at once that the Mexican had consumed the plug past the point where the label would be affixed.

Cutting off a sliver of the tobacco and putting it in his mouth, Wayne Morgan chewed tentatively, then spat out the tobacco.

"Too bitter-tasting for my tongue." He laughed, handing the plug back to Primotivo. "I thought it was Black Anvil brand."

Primotivo's yellow teeth showed as he grinned. He spoke in English.

"No, senor, eet ees *Puesta del Sol*. She take what you call eet, the he-man to chew Sunset *tabaco*, it is true."

Sunset brand tobacco.

One of the two men who had ambushed Holger Solvang up in the remote Hurricane Deck country had discarded a tin label off a plug of *Puesta del Sol* tobacco.

Primotivo walked over to a wreck pan, tossed his dishes into it, and consulted a watch. Then he was clapping his hands together to signal the crew that the noon rest hour was over.

Immediately there was a bustle of activity, interspersed with loud oaths and groans from the work-weary men, as they prepared to go on with their labors.

From his position by the chuckwagon, Wayne Morgan kept his eye on Primotivo. He saw the foreman walk away from the camp, to return leading his shad-belly bay horse. There was a booted rifle under the saddle skirts, the walnut stock gleaming in the sun.

"If that's a fifty-four, I've got my killer," was Morgan's thought.

He started walking across the campground to the spot where Primotivo stood talking with one of his workmen. All Morgan needed was one look at the muzzle of the foreman's saddle gun to know if it fired the same caliber ammunition as the gun that had blasted Holger Solvang into eternity. Caliber .54s were seldom seen these days.

AND THEN came something so totally unexpected that all thoughts of Primotivo Gonzales were erased from Wayne Morgan's mind.

Coming into camp from the wagon road leading from the San Marcos Pass stage-coach route were two riders. One was Larry Gabler, whom Morgan had assumed to be on his way back from La Purissima with his repaired Concord.

Trailing Gabler was another rider. Blue Hawk, his arms bound to his sides with rawhide rope. And the Indian was forking the Masked Rider's demon black stallion, Midnight!

Reining up, Gabler called to the Negro cook: "Are we in time for chow, Joe? I'm headed to Santa Barbara with a prisoner for the sheriff—and it's a long ride without any grub in my belly."

Wayne Morgan's brain reeled. Had Gabler followed him to Blue Hawk's hide-out this morning? If so, then Gabler must not catch him here in this telegraph camp.

Taking advantage of the confusion, as Primotivo and the other workers swarmed around Gabler to size up his Indian captive and the magnificent black, Wayne Morgan hastily crossed the camp-ground, snatched up his roan's trailing reins and his saddle and, without wasting time to saddle up here, hurried off down the slope into the concealment of the chaparral.

FIFTY yards away from camp, Morgan hastily threw his saddle on the roan, mounted, and rode deeper into the brush-choked ravine. Not until he was out of earshot of the workers' camp did he rein up.

Gabler's unexpected appearance here in the Pass, with Blue Hawk as his prisoner, completely altered Morgan's plans. If Gabler had examined the contents of Midnight's saddle-bags—as undoubtedly he had done—then he could not have failed to discover the Masked Rider's famous black garb.

The Santa Barbara sheriff, confronted with that kind of evidence, would have no hesitation in jailing Blue Hawk. Wayne Morgan realized that he would have to abandon his plan to capture and question Primotivo Gonzales this afternoon. Getting Blue Hawk out of Gabler's custody must be his first consideration.

He knew in a vague way that it was around fifteen miles from the summit to Santa Barbara. The summit was near. Gabler could make it to Santa Barbara on the down-grade side of the Pass well before sundown.

Ground-tying his roan, Morgan clambered his way up the ravine until he came to the feeder road which Gabler had taken to reach the work camp. The road was deserted, and Morgan headed along it, ready to duck out of sight into the brush if riders approached from either direction.

The delay for time to eat would keep Blue Hawk and Gabler at the telegraph camp for at least half an hour. The fear that was uppermost in Morgan's mind was that Gabler might ask a group of Webster's men to ride bodyguard with him the rest of the way to Santa Barbara, making a rescue move infinitely hazardous.

When Morgan came in sight of the camp, he took to the brush. The heavy chaparral concealed him until he reached the edge of the clearing. From there he would be able to see Gabler's departure with his prisoner.

Primotivo Gonzales was cursing his men, ordering them to get back to work. Most of the laborers were still gathered around Blue Hawk and Midnight, the black stallion having been tied to one wheel of the chuckwagon.

Morgan's heart sank as he saw the workmen busily passing around the various articles of the Masked Rider's disguise, trying on the black sombrero and domino mask, spreading out the rich black folds of his cape.

"You got a whomping big reward coming up for this haul, Larry!" one of the workmen congratulated Gabler, who was drinking coffee over by the cookfire.

"Not all of it, though!" Gabler yelled back. "Those rewards are payable for the Masked Rider, not for the black horse or the Indian."

At that moment a rider on a big palo-

mino gelding entered the camp from the uphill side. The rider was Keevil-hatted Phil Webster, boss surveyor of the construction gang.

Morgan ground his teeth in helpless rage as he saw Webster dismount alongside Midnight, staring up at Blue Hawk, tied to saddle. Larry Gabler was alongside the big ramrod then, excitedly explaining the details of Blue Hawk's capture.

When Gabler had finished, Webster said triumphantly, "No need for you to bother taking this redskin on to Santa Barbara, Larry. I've got a better idea than that."

Morgan held his breath. Was Webster going to propose that they lynch Blue Hawk on the spot?

"How's that, Mr. Webster?" Gabler asked.

"The sheriff's coming to Santa Ynez, Larry," Webster answered. "I sent a rider down early this morning, with orders to tell Ross Ortega to take the night stage west—if he wanted to dab his loop on the Masked Rider."

Morgan shared Gabler's surprise at Webster's declaration.

"You—you know where the Masked Rider is?" the stage driver asked incredulously.

From his brushy covert, Morgan saw the big engineer grin confidently.

"Sure. Wayne Morgan's your man, Larry. A guest under your own roof. Wayne Morgan's your Masked Rider."

Larry Gabler fingered his jaw thoughtfully.

"You know, Mr. Webster, I had the same hunch. Only I hope it isn't true. After all, Grandma and little Ingrid would have died up on the Deck if Morgan hadn't rescued them."

Before Webster could answer, Primotivo Gonzales strode over to join them, leading his bay saddler.

"Senor Webster," the Mexican foreman said, "Senor Morgan ees not at Santa Ynez. He ate hees deener right here een camp."

Webster's jaw unhinged. He whirled on Primotivo with such savage ferocity that the Mexican recoiled.

"Wayne Morgan—had chow here?"

"*Si*, senor, that ees so."

Webster looked around the camp wildly. "Where is he?"

Primotivo shrugged. "That I do not know, senor. He was here when Senor Gabler arrived, that I know. But now he ees gone. Where—*quien sabe?*"

Morgan saw Blue Hawk relax in his bonds. He was not sure whether or not the Yaqui's keen eyes had spotted him here in camp as they were riding in. At any rate, Primotivo's words had told the Indian that his partner was near at hand.

"If Morgan was here ten minutes ago, then he can't be far off!" Webster shouted. " 'Tivo, get every man who has a saddle horse. Round 'em up. Tell 'em to scour every inch of this Pass within a mile radius of this camp. Tell—tell 'em I'll pay five hundred gold pesos to the man who brings me Wayne Morgan—dead or alive!"

CHAPTER IX

Mystery's Solution

PRIMOTIVO leaped to saddle and headed off up the line of telegraph poles, bawling hoarse orders in Spanish. Up the slope, men dropped their shovels and wire-stringers scuttled down from poles and discarded their climbing harness. Within minutes, men were throwing saddles on the horses which were on picket a short distance from camp.

For the time being, Wayne Morgan knew, it would be safer for him to remain near the camp. But that would soon put him inside the dragnet of armed manhunters Webster would be flinging out over the roundabout terrain.

Gabler and Webster, meanwhile, had hauled Blue Hawk from Midnight's saddle and were roping the Yaqui to a hind wheel of the chuckwagon. The Negro

cook was returning the Masked Rider's black habilaments to the saddle-bags on Midnight.

"Morgan must know that you captured his *compadre*, Larry," Webster was saying. "He might make a try at rescuing him. Until the night stage shows up with the sheriff aboard, you and I must ride herd on this Indian, understand?"

Gabler nodded. "Morgan won't get a chance to rescue the Indian—I can promise you that," he said grimly.

Primotivo Gonzales and eleven riders had assembled with their saddled horses, awaiting Webster's orders. The engineer's voice crackled with venom as he issued those orders.

"You all know Morgan by sight. He's somewhere in this vicinity. Perez, you ride down the stage road a couple of miles and hole up, in case he tries to take the road back to Santa Ynez. Watkins, you do the same up at the summit, if he's headed toward Santa Barbara. The rest of you, fan out. Beat the brush. If you spot Morgan, shoot on sight."

Gabler spoke up, a lone dissenting voice: "Hold on, Webster. We aren't a hundred per cent sure Morgan *is* the Masked Rider. After all, I owe a lot to Morgan, and—"

Webster wheeled angrily, his spade-bearded jaw jutting.

"I'm giving the orders here, young man. Use your brains. Morgan saved Mrs. Solvang's life, sure. But he was traveling with a full-blooded Indian. Miss Solvang told you that herself. It all fits."

Gabler said adamantly, "I'm not so sure, Webster. I took this Indian into the hotel and Grandma had a close look at him. She swears he ain't the Indian who was with Wayne Morgan up on the Deck."

Lying on his belly in the nearby jungle of buckthorn, Morgan breathed a thankful prayer for Grandma Solvang's loyalty. She must have lied to protect Blue Hawk, in spite of the evidence Gabler had

"PLEASE" WAS THE PASSWORD

By Bess Ritter

AMONG THE POLITEST people in the Old West were the so-called rough-and-ready bandits who robbed the stages that traveled along the Emigrant Trail from California eastward. They said "please" to the passengers before plundering them, and wouldn't take a penny from a person with a good hard luck story.

Keepsakes and other jewelry of sentimental value were very rarely pilfered, for the highwayman considered himself a gentleman and was considerate of his prisoners. In one case, for example, the thief scratched the itching nose of his prisoner with the butt of a rifle, since the poor held-up fellow had his hands in the air. While the famous Tom Bell—a surgeon turned bandit—habitually dressed the wounds of the persons he was unavoidably obliged to shoot.

But no bandit was more thoughtful than the popular Black Bart, who was super courtly to women travelers. What's more, he never fired a single shot in the course of a career which consisted of twenty-five successful holdups. He left notes of apology inside the empty express boxes and mail bags that he robbed. They rhymed, and generally ended something like this:

SO DON'T BLAME ME FOR WHAT I'VE DONE
I DON'T DESERVE YOUR CURSES
AND IF FOR ANY CAUSE I'M HUNG
LET IT BE FOR MY VERSES.

shown her against him.

"All right, Webster," Gabler said uncertainly. "But I wish you'd have your men bring Morgan in alive, if they flush him anywhere here in the Pass."

Riders were already leaving the camp, fanning out in all directions. Webster's road guards hammered off down the slope following the wagon tracks toward the main Pass highway. The others, including Primotivo Gonzales, carried their hunt into the nearby brush.

It soon became apparent to Morgan that Webster, Gabler and the Negro cook were going to remain in camp to ride herd on the prisoner who was lashed to the wheel of the chuckwagon. All three men climbed into the hooded forward compartment of the wagon box and hunkered down out of sight, ready to open fire if any attempt should be made to rescue the Yaqui.

Of all the manhunters, only Primotivo Gonzales was using any skill in his search. Morgan saw Primotivo studying the roan's tracks, at the spot where Morgan had off-saddled while he ate.

"He's picked up my trail," Morgan thought tensely, "and it'll lead him straight to the roan if he's any kind of a tracker at all."

It was patently impossible to invade the camp directly and go to Blue Hawk's aid. Webster had said that the night stage west would be bringing Sheriff Ross Ortega over the Pass. Blue Hawk would be taken down to the stage road to meet the sheriff, probably after sundown.

MORGAN wriggled his way back out of the brush, had a long look at the feeder road before crossing it, then hurried down the ravine toward where he had left his roan.

Somewhere off to the right he heard a horse and rider threshing through the brush. He froze, lowering himself behind a glacial boulder, and remained stockstill as one of the telegraph workers spurred his horse along the ravine wall almost close enough to touch the man in hiding.

When the manhunter had vanished, Morgan emerged from behind the boulder and continued on down the ravine.

Before he came in sight of his roan, he knew that Primotivo had beaten him to the horse. He could hear the Mexican foreman's excited jabbering in Spanish.

Drawing a Colt, Morgan slithered through the brush until he reached the lip of a cutbank. Directly below him was the hammerhead roan; in the background was Primotivo's bay. The Mexican was standing tensely alongside the roan, his head cranking right and left as he keened the roundabout brush.

Then an idea seemed to strike the foreman. He strode past Morgan's roan to pick up his mount's reins.

"Aims to back off and kep an eye on my bronc," Morgan deduced. "Thinks sooner or later I'll come back here."

Primotivo had a gun in his hand. He was obviously in a high state of nervous tension, realizing his own danger.

He made no attempt to mount. Instead, picking up the reins, he led the bay back into the brush, out of sight of the roan.

Morgan worked his way with infinite caution along the rim of the cutbank. Twenty yards down the ravine he saw Primotivo stripping the saddle off the bay, which he had tethered to a dead juniper snag. That done, Primotivo headed back up the bottom of the ravine, seeking a vantage point from which he could keep his eye on Wayne Morgan's saddle horse.

Morgan waited until the Mexican was directly below him.

Then, crouching like a cougar to spring, he jumped off the cutbank, landing on Primotivo Gonzales' broad back.

The big foreman bawled with terror as he went down, Morgan's left knee gouging his head into the dirt. A paralyzing blow from Morgan's gun-barrel knocked the cocked revolver from Primotivo's hand at the same instant that Morgan was jerking a second Colt from Primotivo's belt.

Straddling his prey, Wayne Morgan put the cold muzzles of both guns against the nape of Primotivo's swarthy neck.

"*'Sta bueno,* Primotivo!" the Robin Hood outlaw said icily. "You have your

choice—make *habla* pronto or get your brains blown all over the landscape."

Primotivo lay quivering, belly down to the ground, the pressure of Morgan's gun muzzles pinning his head against the dirt. The devastating surprise of this attack, seemingly from out of the sky, had demoralized him.

His voice muffled, the foreman choked out, "*Esta bastante*—it is enough, Senor Morgan. I talk."

Morgan got to his feet, allowing Primotivo to sit up. Stark terror was in the Mexican's eyes as he peered up at his captor. It was obvious that he expected to die at any instant. He begged for mercy in an incoherent mixture of English and Spanish.

Wayne Morgan decided the time was ripe to run a bluff on this thoroughly cowed employe of Webster's.

"Why," he asked grimly, "did you try to crawl into my bedroom last night, Primotivo?"

Gonzales' cringing reaction was enough to give away his guilt, but he did not deny having been the cinnamon-hatted prowler, even though he was probably ignorant of the telltale marks of the indelible pencil still visible on his sweat-rimed brow.

"I—I had orders, senor. It was believed you were the Masked Rider, and for the Masked Rider there is a very great bounty, dead or alive."

Morgan smiled, keeping Primotivo under the menace of his point-blank gun drop.

"Phil Webster ordered you to kill me in my sleep?"

"*Si.* I do not hang for Senor Webster. It was he."

"All right. That I knew already, Primotivo. Now answer me this: Why did you and Webster follow the Solvang *viejos* into the Hurricane Deck country when they went up there to hunt the condors?"

PRIMOTIVO'S eyes lost some of their terror. A crafty shine filmed the black irises.

"I no *sabe*, Senor Morgan."

Thrusting one of his guns in holster, Morgan reached into a pocket and drew out the .54 shells and the tobacco label which Blue Hawk had brought him from the San Raphaels.

"You were careless, Primotivo, thinking you left only dead behind you. Did you know that the little *muchacha*, the baby Ingrid, saw you that day? You were wearing the sombrero which you lost in my room at the hotel—and which you later found on the ground beneath my window."

Primotivo's defiance wilted, though he did not fully understand the meaning of the objects he had glimpsed in Morgan's hand. He was aware only that he was combatting an intellect far too powerful for him.

"Your only chance to escape the gallows," Morgan went on, pressing his advantage to the limit, "is to talk freely, Primotivo. Was it Webster whose bullet killed Senor Holger?"

The last vestige of the Mexican's defiance faded now. He said despondently: "*Si*—it was Senor Webster who shot Holger Solvang. My boollet dropped the senora's palomino *caballo*. Eet ees true—I went down to the trail after the amboosh. I thought the senora was dead. But you weel have mercy on me for not keeling the leetle *niña*, senor?"

Morgan's lips curled in disgust. "Oh, sure. You just left her to starve to death. . . . Listen! Why did Webster lure the Solvangs up into the mountains to kill them? Was it because this telegraph trail is merely a blind to cover up a *railroad* Webster has surveyed through San Marcos Pass?"

Primotivo's reaction at the word "railroad" could not have been more violent if the Robin Hood outlaw had actually read his innermost thoughts. Only by turning traitor to the man for whom he was working could the Mexican save his own skin now.

"*Si*, that is true! But how could you know? It was a secret Senor Webster guarded with his life. None of his men except myself knew of the railroad."

Morgan pulled in a long, slow breath. He knew he was near the solution of the complex mystery now.

"And Holger Solvang's stage line was a barrier to the railroad's plans? Is that why he wanted the Solvangs dead?"

Primotivo nodded despairingly. "The railroad could not build through San Marcos Pass until Senor Solvang's stage franchise had expired. It had fifteen more years to run."

Morgan was cursing himself mentally for not having thought of the franchise angle. The San Marcos Stage Line had a long-term franchise to transport mail, passengers and freight between Santa Barbara and Santa Ynez. Without that franchise, Webster's projected railway would be powerless to operate in the Pass.

It took only a few more questions for Morgan to learn the truth—why a man like Webster should have resorted to killing the Solvangs instead of buying their franchise for his railroad as would have seemed reasonable. The Mexican foreman who, for years before now, had known more of Webster's workings than that conniver would have believed possible, answered readily. It was plain that the only important thing in life to him now was his own worthless hide.

Webster, Morgan soon gathered, represented an unholy alliance of high-binders—if he was not actually their king pin—who worked on a premise of their own. That it was never worth while to pay out a penny when mayhem and murder would work as effectually. It had been tried in other cases—far removed from a railroad scheme—and had invariably worked. Phil Webster had seen no reason why elimination of the Solvangs should not prove as effective as other murders had.

As for Heddy and Larry, the plan had been to take care of them when the proper time came—*after* the Solvang stage-coach venture had gone completely to pot, without a guiding hand. It would have been easy then for Webster and his cohorts to take over then and not feel the pinch.

Morgan listened, attentive and sober, until the frightened Primotivo had said his last hysterical word. Then Morgan said, in a more gentle voice than that in which he had spoken before:

"You will get your chance to tell this story of yours in court, Primotivo, when Philip Webster stands trial for Holger Solvang's killing. But I'm sorry that right now—"

Without warning, Morgan clubbed the Mexican across the temple with his gun muzzle. Primotivo Gonzales' knees unhinged, and he toppled limply at Morgan's feet.

CHAPTER X

Masked Rider's Vengeance

BLUE HAWK hung limp in the ropes which bound him to the chuckwagon wheel. Dusk was filling the San Marcos Pass with blue and violet layers of shadow. The first stars were beginning to prick the black heavens.

The men lying in wait inside the chuckwagon had not spoken for over an hour, but their menace was there, that of Webster and Gabler and the Negro cook. Midnight had strayed away from the wagon, to the outer limit of the forty-foot lass'-rope which tethered him to the wagon tongue. The black was grazing now alongside the manzanita thickets which rimmed the camp.

Suddenly, to the Yaqui's sensitive ears, came a whisper of sound from those manzanitas. Midnight headed up, scenting something. Then Blue Hawk saw what he knew would escape the attention of the manhunters crouching behind the canvas hood of the chuckwagon behind him.

A bronzed hand and forearm—Wayne Morgan's arm—reached out from the dense shadows of the underbrush and deftly unbuckled the near saddle-bag on the kak on Midnight. A whispered order had frozen the stallion in his tracks, a

whisper too low to have reached even Blue Hawk's ears.

Three times Morgan's hand dipped into the *alforja* pouch, drawing from it the Masked Rider's black Stetson, domino mask and folded cape. Then the hand was withdrawn, and in the dim twilight even Blue Hawk could not be entirely sure of what he had seen.

The Indian relaxed in his bonds, a vast peace pervading his jaded spirits. His *compañero* had whisked away the Masked Rider's distinctive black garb without his hidden enemies dreaming that he was anywhere near this place.

No further sound came from the thickets. Minutes dragged as full night descended into the San Marcos Pass.

Then Blue Hawk felt the wagon shake as Phil Webster came crawling out over the footboard, followed by Gabler and the cook.

"The sheriff's stage is due to pass here directly," Gabler was saying. "We can't wait here any longer."

Webster said grimly, "Either Wayne Morgan has escaped my cordon, or else he's been captured. At any rate we have the Indian and the Masked Rider's horse to show Ross Ortega that the outlaw *is* in this neighborhood."

Blue Hawk felt his bonds loosen as Webster untied him. Gabler reeled in Midnight's rope and the Indian was ordered to step into saddle. The Negro cook brought up horses for the other two men.

With only the stars to guide them, Gabler and Webster headed down the feeder road, bracketing Blue Hawk's stirrups. The Negro remained behind at the camp.

Blue Hawk's ears picked up the rattle of stage wheels in the distance, coming down the San Marcos grades from the summit. By the time the riders reached the stage road, the twin oil lamps of the Concord were visible to the south.

A full moon, bright as furbished silver, lifted above the black shoulder of towering La Cumbra Peak to the eastward, revealing the Santa Ynez night stage as it rounded a bend of the Pass road.

The driver kicked his brake and reined in his six-horse team as he caught sight of the three riders waiting for him at the telegraph camp turn-off. Phil Webster reined his horse forward into the glare of the square oil lamps as the Concord came to a halt.

At once the stage door opened and the Concord lurched on its bullhide thoroughbraces as a tall, swarthy man wearing a five-pointed silver star on his coat alighted. Sheriff Ross Ortega spoke with no preliminary greetings.

"You say you've got the Masked Rider cornered, Webster?" he called sharply, his eyes sliding off the engineer to recognize Larry Gabler.

"Not exactly, Sheriff," Webster said. "But we've got his Indian partner, and that's the Masked Rider's black stallion the Yaqui is forking."

As the sheriff walked over to stare at Blue Hawk, Webster told him of the afternoon's vigil following Wayne Morgan's brief visit to the telegraph camp at noon.

"My men will have him corraled before daylight," Webster wound up confidently. "Wayne Morgan is the Masked Rider—not a doubt of it—and he can't escape."

THE Santa Barbara County sheriff shook his head glumly.

"Black horses are hard to identify, Webster. And this Indian—how do you know he runs with the Masked Rider? For that matter, what proof have you that this Wayne Morgan *is* the Masked Rider?"

A BULL STORY

The lady cowed the cowpoke,
No beefs from that poor creature—
She put her brand upon him,
And steered him to the preacher!

—Pecos Pete

Phil Webster fingered his spade beard, grinning more confidently.

"We've got the Masked Rider's black mask and Stetson and cape, Sheriff. Isn't that evidence enough?"

The sheriff's face flushed with excitement as he saw Webster rummage a hand in the nearest saddle-bag. Blue Hawk's face was as impassive as that of a graven image as he saw the shocked look cross Webster's face when he found the pouch empty.

"Wrong bag," Webster said sheepishly. "Just a minute, Sheriff."

He crossed in front of Midnight, Larry Gabler lifting the lead rope tied to the black's headstall. But the second saddle-bag merely contained freshly laundered shirts and socks, a first-aid kit, and a pair of cased field-glasses.

"The Masked Rider's stuff ain't here!" Webster cried frantically, glancing up at Larry Gabler. "Larry, didn't you see Joe stow those black clothes in this bag—in the other bag?"

"Larry Gabler nodded blankly. "We must have dropped it out riding down from the camp," he said. "But—" He broke off as a steely voice cut through the moon-drenched night, from the side of the road.

"You are looking for the Masked Rider, senores?"

Webster spun about. The sheriff sprang forward to stand beside him as all eyes were turned toward the source of that ringing baritone voice.

Stepping away from the roadside brush was a tall figure shrouded in a black cape, topped by a black sombrero. The face was in shadow, eyes glinting through the twin slots of a domino mask.

But the paralyzed men standing alongside Midnight were looking only at the bores of the six-guns which covered them.

"The *Masked Rider!*" whispered Sheriff Ortega, his arms groping upward. "Webster, you've sucked us into a trap!"

Blue Hawk swung down from the stirrups, no move being made to halt him. He stepped over to the Masked Rider's side and took the gun held out to him.

"Senor Sheriff," the Masked Rider went on, his voice totally different from Wayne Morgan's drawl, "Phil Webster here is the criminal you will be hanging on your gallows shortly. He is the killer of Holger Solvang—and that I intend to prove."

PHIL WEBSTER'S face twitched, turning ghastly pale in the argentine moonlight. Then he laughed.

"That is preposterous!" he jeered. "Where is your proof?"

The Masked Rider said crisply, "Your own foreman, Primotivo Gonzales, is my witness. Sheriff, Webster has been at work for a railroad company—his own, probably—rather than for a telegraph line. He had to dispose of the Solvang family, in order to seize their San Marcos franchise for a song when it would be put up at a forced sale he meant to wangle. And you, Gabler, would have been killed, as Miss Hedwiga would have been, had Webster's plans worked out."

The sheriff turned to scowl at Phil Webster. The engineer licked his lips. His hands, held at the level of his Keevil hat brim, were trembling.

"Would you take the word of a known outlaw against mine, Sheriff?" he demanded hoarsely. "This whole thing is outrageous."

"Sheriff," the Masked Rider went on, "Holger Solvang was shot by a fifty-four calibered rifle. May I ask that you check the bore of the carbine Webster carries in his saddle boot?"

Ortega hesitated, then stepped over to Webster's palomino and had a look at the rifle in its scabbard.

"A Ballard fifty-four repeater," he mumbled uncertainly. "Webster, what have you got to say to this? Is it true that you have been working for a railroad company? Speak up!"

Phil Webster swallowed hard. "He's lying!" he panted hoarsely. "Masked Rider, I dare you to take off that mask. You are Wayne Morgan! *You* killed Holger Solvang—"

The Masked Rider stepped forward,

looking up at Larry Gabler, who throughout these tense moments had said nothing.

"Mr. Gabler," he said sharply. "I understand that you also believe that I am Wayne Morgan. Morgan's eyes are blue. Mine are brown, as you may have noted in the reward posters. Look."

GABLER stared down at the Robin Hood outlaw, but the sweep of the black hat brim put the eyes behind the mask in shadow, making it impossible for Gabler to identify their color.

"Your voice—isn't Morgan's," he admitted. "I—I don't want to think you are Morgan. I am in Morgan's debt."

The Masked Rider laughed softly. "Wayne Morgan is waiting for this stage, further down the road," he said calmly. "With him is Primotivo Gonzales, ready to testify that Phil Webster ambushed Solvang after luring him into the Hurricane Deck country on a pretext. Gonzales is ready to testify that Webster ordered him to kill Wayne Morgan in his sleep last night—"

Ortega and Gabler were caught off-guard by what happened next. Cawing a strangled oath, Phil Webster lowered his hands to paw under his jumper. Moonlight glinted on darting gun steel as the man made his desperate, cornered-rat play to gun the Masked Rider down.

The Colt .45s in the Robin Hood outlaw's fists roared in unison, flame spurting orange-purple from their bores. Converging slugs smashed into Webster a shaved instant before he could drop his own gun-hammer.

Sheriff Ortega fell back against Gabler's horse as Webster crashed against them, falling then, to lie motionless in the dirt. The two bullet-holes in his brow were spaced so closely together that a five-cent piece would have covered them.

Raw gunsmoke swirled around the Masked Rider as he stepped back to the roadside.

"Put Webster's corpse into the stage," the outlaw ordered. "Blue Hawk, take the sheriff's guns, Gabler's guns, and throw them down the ravine. They can get them tomorrow. By that time you and I will be long gone."

When the Yaqui had finished disarming the two men, Gabler dismounted and helped Ortega load the engineer into the waiting Concord. Then the Masked Rider glanced up at the driver on the stage boot, who had been a transfixed spectator of this scene.

"Get going, Jehu. You'll find Wayne Morgan waiting down the road a mile or so, with Primotivo Gonzales. I think Morgan will want to accompany you back to Santa Ynez. Morgan is my best friend. But that, Senor Sheriff, hardly gives you any reason to arrest him."

Moments later the stage moved off, brake shoes screeching on locked wheels. The Masked Rider turned to Blue Hawk the moment the stage was out of sight around a near bend of the road, and said to the Indian:

"In all our years together, Hawk, no one has come closer to our secret than Larry Gabler. For the next hour, you are going to be the Masked Rider, *sabe?*"

It was but the work of a moment for Wayne Morgan to hand his Robin Hood costume over to the Indian. Then, swinging aboard Larry Gabler's horse, Morgan headed down into the ravine, taking a short cut to a lower level of the stage road.

When the west-bound stage pulled out of a long cavern of shadow and rounded a bend, two men and a roan saddle horse were waiting in the moonlight.

The stage creaked to a dusty halt. The Santa Barbara sheriff and Larry Gabler came spilling out of the Concord. As the Masked Rider had said would be the case, the men waiting for them were Wayne Morgan and the late Phil Webster's foreman, Primotivo Gonzales.

The Mexican's arms were bound behind his back. He had a bloody welt on his temple, and even yet was not entirely conscious.

Larry Gabler rushed forward to pump Morgan's hand, peering intently into the cowboy's eyes. "They *are* blue," he said enigmatically. "Morgan, for a while I had my doubts about you. I thought you were

the Masked Rider, maybe, but—"

The sheriff, taking charge of Gonzales, suddenly stiffened. Seizing Gabler's hand, Ortega pointed off up the ridge behind them.

A thousand feet higher up the pass, a lone horseman stood etched against the disk of the California harvest moon, the night breeze stirring the long cape off his shoulders.

"The Masked Rider," Wayne Morgan chuckled. "Even he could hardly be in two places at once, could he?"

SHERIFF Ortega shook his head slowly from side to side.

"I used to think that it would be the crowning achievement of my career behind the star to arrest that man," he said. "Now I'm ready to believe that he isn't as black as he is painted. Why, he could have killed both of us up there on the road, Gabler, as well as not—"

Wayne Morgan stepped over to his waiting roan. Deep in the brush below the road was Larry Gabler's pony. In due time that horse would make its way unassisted to its home stable at Santa Ynez, Morgan knew.

Larry Gabler, climbing back into the stage behind Ortega and his Mexican prisoner, paused with his foot on the iron step.

"The Masked Rider said you'd be going back with us," he said. "I realize it is impossible, but I wish *he* could attend Heddy's and my wedding—along with you, Wayne Morgan."

Morgan smiled.

"I cannot leave this country without saying *hasta la vista* to your fiancée and Grandma Solvang," he admitted. "To say nothing of a sweet little tike I'll never forget."

Gabler slammed the door of the Concord shut and lifted the canvas curtain of the stage window to peer up at the high riding moon. He saw the mysterious black-caped rider on the black stallion curvet around and vanish below the horizon. Santa Barbara County likely never would see him again.

The stage driver yelled at his team, kicked off the brake, and resumed the trip on down the twisting Pass road toward Santa Ynez Valley.

Wayne Morgan, jogging along behind the stage, glanced up at the star-dusted California heavens, and saw a giant condor wheeling on motionless wings. And he found himself hoping that he would never lay eyes on a California condor again. • • •

COMING UP NEXT ISSUE:

A man believed to be the infamous Masked Rider is about to be lynched, and the brew of revolution is boiling along the Mexican Border—in Wayne Morgan's next perilous adventure!

GUN RIDERS of SAHUARO

A New Masked Rider Novel

by DEAN OWEN

Plus Many Other Gripping Stories of the Thrilling Old West!

The wagons went racing past the stunned raiders

by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

WARDELL'S BOOTSTRAPS

Any damned fool can follow rules, but it takes a hell-roaring fool-on-wheels like Wardell to break them—and invent his own!

THE MORNING dawned on Pecan Creek gray and wet, and Jim Wardell looked with impatience at the flash flood of highwater boiling down out of the Bobcat Mountains. He knew that he could not get his four freight wagons across

before three days. Yet old Colonel Mallin, the trader, who owned these wagons, along with another dozen or so like them, had given him an even week to drive this load up from Texas into his headquarters at Reynolds Valley.

There was little to mark Jim Wardell as a wagonboss. He was younger than any one of the hands except the kid, Kiowa Logan. He was lean and he was tall, and there was no fat on him. But on the other hand he did not have any rush about him, but had an easy way in his moving and thinking which had not quite convinced the hard and inflexible old trader that he had the makings of a good wagonboss. The colonel had turned the train over to him because Wardell knew the way down to Texas and back, and because he was the only man available who did.

"You've been on four trips with old Jake," Colonel Mallin had told him, "and you know the trail. There's only one thing for me to give you strict orders about, and that is, don't stop at Pinetop. That's the devil's own collection of riffraff, and if they find out the value of that load of merchandise, you'll not come through those mountains with it. Go around that town, whatever you do. And get back here on schedule. You've got time to make it without killing your animals."

That was how the colonel was; he gave men orders and expected them to act on them.

Now, with a high creek and the low ridge of the mountains standing between him and the completion of his trip, Jim Wardell was facing a delay that the old man was not going to like; that would put a black mark against Wardell on his first trip as boss.

Kiowa Logan, who handled the mules, came down to the muddy bank where Wardell stood, and said, "That's a right long hundred foot to the other side, ain't it?"

"Too long!" Wardell said. He watched the boiling muddy water bring an uprooted postoak sapling downstream twisting and turning in a mad gyration which would have swept away anything it touched. "It's eight feet deep in the middle, and it might as well be a thousand."

"So we do what?"

"So we sit on the bank till it goes down," Wardell answered.

Logan made a grimace. "Boy, the Colonel will scorch our hair when we show up."

WARDELL was thinking of the four thousand dollars worth of merchandise in the wagons, much of it dress goods and other perishables, which would be ruined by contact with muddy water; baking powder, flour, medicines, and the like.

"He'll just have to snort fire, then," the wagon boss said. "I'm not thinking of floating those wagons across this stream like it is."

"What'll I do with the extra mules, then? Let 'em graze?"

"We've got to put short hobbles on all of them. Lot of work, but we can't have 'em straying now. We'd lose 'em all." Catching and hobbling a dozen mules would be troublesome.

The rest of the boys were eating breakfast around the fire on the damp ground. There were four drivers besides Wardell and the mule wrangler, and they listened to Wardell's orders without surprise or grumbling. His was the responsibility, and they did not want any part of it. It was he who would have to face the colonel.

The mules were scattered over twenty acres of the prairie beside the creek. They had plenty of lush grass, and they had freedom, which they wanted to keep. Wardell and old Pop Newsome saddled up and had to chase them down one at a time. They brought them up to the camp where Kiowa was ready with the short rope hobbles.

They had worked half the day, and had caught all but four of the mules when an accident happened. Pop Newsome had a particularly mean black animal on his lariat, and he had to throw him before Kiowa could get close to his front legs.

The mule was lying on his side when

old Pop absent-mindedly let the lariat go slack. The obstreperous animal suddenly lunged upward, throwing out his two front feet to get a purchase on the ground and get up. He was halfway up, with Kiowa trying to hang onto one front leg, when Pop woke up to what he had done.

Pop spurred his horse, jerked the slack out of the rope and threw the mule again. The mule went over on his side, his legs threshing the air violently. One iron-shod hoof caught the kid on the side of the leg and knocked him sprawling, where he lay with his leg twisted under him at a peculiar angle, and a blank, stunned look on his face, blood saturating his dungarees.

Two more of the drivers rushed to him as Wardell slid off his horse, shouting to Pop to hold onto the mule.

Kiowa Logan's leg was broken a few inches above the knee, and the calks of the steel shoe had laid open a piece of flesh as big as a man's hand. Logan lay on his back, shocked numb. Instinctively he tried to get up, and then when his leg wouldn't work, he gazed at it in puzzlement.

Wardell shoved him down on his back, and straightened out his leg. He rolled the boy a cigarette, and said, "Now don't you move."

He turned to the two mule skinners and ordered them to fix a blanket on a couple of sticks, and make room in the bed of one of the wagons for Kiowa. He told Pop to finish hobbling those mules by himself if it took him all day.

When they brought the improvised stretcher, they lifted the youth onto it and took him and laid him down in the bed of one of the covered wagons, with packing cases stacked high all around him. Wardell pried open boxes until he found cases of assorted medicines. He looked them over, and the only thing he could find that offered any help was a bottle of codeine tablets, the label of which indicated that they were for headaches and other aches and pains. He gave the boy a double dose of these, without much hope that they would be of any value.

He sent one of the drivers to cut hickory saplings, and with these he made splints and straightened out the boy's leg and tied the splints in place as he had once seen his grandfather do in such a case. He tore white cloth off a new bolt and bandaged the wound. Again he felt his helplessness to cope with the situation, but there was nothing else he could do.

A LITTLE while later in the morning, Kiowa began to show signs of the pain that was gripping him, and Wardell gave him more of the tablets. An hour later he gave him still more, and at noon he was surprised to see that the boy closed his eyes and seemed to be either asleep or unconscious.

Wardell walked down to the creek, watched the water boiling down between its banks, and cursed the rain, which was bringing him disaster. There was nothing to do but to wait—and to anticipate the wrath of the colonel when he arrived late.

By the middle of the afternoon the gray clouds had thinned and the rain had stopped, but the creek was still rising, draining water out of the mountains. Wardell restlessly patched gear and tried to keep the men busy. He sat on a wagon tongue, keeping his hands busy with a piece of harness, and looked at the ridge of hills across the creek. One day's good travel would take him through them, and another day would get him to Reynolds Valley, and get the youth to a doctor.

He looked at the creek, not more than a hundred feet wide and eight or ten feet deep as it now ran. But, as Kiowa had observed to him, it was a long hundred feet. It might as well have been fifty miles wide, so far as crossing it was concerned. He stuck a green switch into the mud to mark the water's level.

Toward night the creek stopped rising, and Kiowa had a temperature. He lay quietly in the bed of the covered wagon, and part of the time he was sweating and gritting his teeth to keep from displaying any evidence of his pain.

"How you feeling?" Wardell inquired, as he rolled him a cigarette.

"All right." Kiowa tried to smile.

The broken leg was swelled and inflamed, and Wardell had to loosen the cloths that held the splints in place. He studied the bottle of codeine tablets, and he reasoned that if, as the directions said, two tablets would kill the pain of a headache, then more tablets would kill a bigger pain. If a little was good for a man, more would be better. He gave Kiowa four more of the tablets.

Sundown came and the night dragged on. Kiowa began to move restlessly. His fever was higher, and his leg redder and more swollen, and he had lapses of consciousness during which he talked deliriously. The men sat around the little campfire and tried to make conversation, and each time they tried the talk died from lack of spirit.

"That kid will get gangrene, I tell you, and it will kill him," Pop opined. "It's sure awful to see a man suffer like that. I mind a time down in the Blackforks when a man broke his leg fifty miles from a doctor—"

"Shut up," somebody snapped, and they sat around while the slow moments ticked off toward daylight.

Wardell could not be still. He went and looked after the mules every half hour or so; he crawled into the wagon with Kiowa every few minutes, feeling his forehead, seeing the temperature rise, and the leg becoming more swollen and inflamed, hearing the delirious talk.

He went out and walked down to the creek in the darkness, and he let his thoughts come to the surface. He had been no flash in the pan, but he had made it a rule to do his job right. It was his belief that if he took a man's money for work, the man had a right to have the work done the way he wanted it done. He had tried to work for Colonel Mallin on that basis, and because of his reliability, he had finally got his chance as wagonboss.

Now he had lost it because of rain. The old colonel had got his title in the Civil War, and he had brought with him out of that conflict his own ideas of how to run a business, ideas which had been successful.

MALLIN'S Trading Post was a successful and growing enterprise in these bad days after the War Between the States. The colonel had come into the wild Indian Nations and set up a business, growing from a small retail trading post to a big freighting center and wholesale distributing point, spreading out to the smaller settlements in the Indian Nations. The colonel had built this business along the lines of almost military discipline. Do what the colonel ordered, and you got along with him; disobey any order and you were out. The colonel had a name as a hard man to work for

Wardell picked up a rock and threw it into the stream; it was an unconscious expression of his impatience at the way things had turned out. He was a young man who had grown out of nothing, who had come up into the Territory to try to lift himself out of his obscurity by his own bootstraps. Because of the rain he was falling back down before he had got well started.

He turned impatiently and went back to the wagon holding the sick youth. Kiowa was delirious, and Wardell bathed his fevered head with water and watched him until he quieted for a moment. Kiowa was in worse shape than he had been earlier in the day. Wardell knew this could not go on much longer.

Wardell crawled out of the wagon and approached the fire with a sudden quickness to his movements. A couple of the men were trying to snatch a little sleep, and he kicked the soles of their boots to waken them. They sat up, looking at him groggily.

"Get all the case goods out of the wagon Kiowa is in," he said. "I'm taking him to Pinetop. There's a doctor there."

Pop Newsome, whose carelessness had caused the accident, said, "You're crazy, Jim. In the first place, you can't get across. Second place, that doctor in Pinetop is drunk eight days a week, and ain't never fit to treat a sick hound. In the third place, the colonel would fire us for going to Pinetop, the minute he heard about it."

"What's your job beside another man's life?" Wardell snapped. "Kiowa goes to Pinetop. Get a move on you."

Old Dave Bunch said, "Now, if that wagon had wings—"

"It'll have wings—water wings! There's plenty of deadfall logs up and down the creek. We'll get axes and trim a couple of them to tie along each side of the wagonbed, and float her across. Dave, go harness a mule to snake a couple of big ten-foot logs to the wagon."

"Just one little item," Droopy Dorn argued. "Them mules ain't got gills like a fish, and that water's eight foot deep, and running like a mill stream."

"This is how we answer that one," Wardell said. "Somebody swims across with a length of rope and makes it fast around a tree. We'll tie the near end to the bridle of a mule to keep him from washing downstream, and make him swim it. When we get both of them across, we tie the rope to the tongue of the wagon, and let them pull the floating wagon across. By giving them plenty of rope, we can start the mules high enough above the creek for them to get a good enough foothold to pull an empty wagon up to dry ground. If two mules can't do it, we'll use four—or six. That wagon is going across that stream!"

Droopy Dorn puzzled over this a moment, then offered, "I seen something like that done a few times, but how is the first one of us going to get across that stream to rig up the rope? That water is in a plumb hurry. Me, I'm a little too old to try to swim against a forty-mile current filled with floatin' saplings."

"I'll swim it," Wardell answered. "Now get busy, all of you. There's a man in that wagon that's going to die if we don't get him to a doctor."

Droopy got to his feet. "Well, it was nice working for the Colonel," he opined. "I wonder is there any work down in Texas for a crew of freighters?"

By the first streak of dawn, they had trimmed and snaked two dry logs down to the crossing, had unloaded and brought the wagon with Kiowa in it, down to the water's edge, and slung the logs under the running gear of the wagon for additional buoyancy. Wardell took a loop of a rope in his arm and waded into the swift stream with his clothes off. He had waded less than three yards when the force of the current swept him off his feet.

THEN he settled down to swim, fighting the current, angling across the stream, swimming three feet to progress one foot. Stumps and trees swept down upon him, and he avoided them sometimes only by inches as he made his slow progress across the swollen stream. It took him half an hour to swim that hundred feet, and he crawled out on the opposite mud bank exhausted, but with the rope still on his arm.

He paid out the rope—new rope out of the load of merchandise—and went upstream a hundred feet, where he made the rope fast to a tree. Then he gave his order.

"Tie the end of the next rope to the harness, then tie that mule to this rope and push him overboard."

Droopy and Dave tied the next line of rope to a trace, and tied the end of Wardell's rope to the bridle bit. They had to use a whip to force the mule into the water, but once in, the mule swam, pulling against the rope which was pulling him across. Thus the mule, like a weight on the end of a pendulum, came across the creek to Wardell's bank, where Wardell caught him and led him up the cut to drier ground.

They got the second mule across in the same maner, this time with a doubletree tied to the breeching, and towing a third rope. Wardell worked fast. He hitched the team together, and made his end of the third rope fast to the doubletree, while the men across the creek made their end of the rope fast to the tongue of the wagon. Another rope ran from the wagon to the tree a hundred feet upstream from the cut, and on Wardell's side.

Wardell started his team pulling on the rope which stretched across the creek to

the wagon tongue. The wagon lumbered down to the water and tried to float downstream, but was held back by the upstream rope. The wagon floated across the creek slowly, came out on the opposite side. Wardell's mules grunted and strained, and under the lash, got the wagon up to higher and drier ground.

Wardell loosened his ropes and brought the team back and hitched it to the wagon. He got his clothes and gun out of the wagon bed, and dressed, and then went back down to the creek bank.

"You boys hold everything here until the water is low enough to cross safely, then come on up to Pinetop. I'll be waiting for you there."

"Pinetop?" Droopy yelled. "You want us to go there?"

"That's orders," Wardell shouted, and went back to the wagon.

The road leading uphill to Pinetop was particularly rocky, due to the rain having used the ruts to drain downhill, and having washed the dirt away from the buried rocks in the ruts. Kiowa had become fully conscious, and the bumpy ride was such agony that despite his efforts, he could not keep from crying out at times. Wardell got out his bottle of headache medicine and kept feeding him tablets.

By noon he reached the mountaintop settlement, and Kiowa was again unconscious. Pinetop was just a wide place in the road that crossed the ridge of hills, a big store, an eating place with rooms above, a recreation parlor, and a few scattered pine board and log cabins.

He stopped at the store and inquired about the doctor. The storekeeper, a concave, suspicious-looking man with handlebar mustaches, countered with another question, "What do you want with him?"

Wardell was on the point of making a sharp answer when he remembered his mission. "I've got a man that's been hurt and needs attention."

"*H'm*," the man answered. "Well, you'll find him in that shack down there by the elm tree if he's around. He'll probably be there, though, sleeping off his drunk."

Wardell turned and went out and drove up to the elm tree with the shack under it, and after a long period of knocking, aroused a big fat, bleary-eyed man who came to the door in his underwear.

"I've got a man with a broken leg here," Wardell said, "and he needs attention right now."

The fat man studied this sleepily. "I can't do anything for you, yet. If you could come back in say three or four hours—"

"Right now," Wardell snapped. "This man is going to die if he doesn't get attention. Come on, help me get him indoors."

SLOWLY the big man twisted his nose, then reluctantly got into his shoes and pants, and they got Kiowa onto the doctor's rumpled bed. The doctor untied the rags they had placed around the wound, and some of his bleariness fell away from him. He sniffed, and turned, as though to another doctor, and said, "Smell that? It'll be a bad case of gangrene in no time."

Somewhere out of the depths of the man's consciousness there arose a professional alertness. "Strange," he said. "A man in that shape ought to be delirious with pain."

Wardell took the bottle of headache medicine out of his pocket. There were only three tablets left in the bottle. "I gave him some of these whenever the pain got too bad," he offered. "I didn't know what else to do."

The doctor examined the bottle. "Codeine," he said. "Well, you couldn't have done better—if you haven't killed him. Well, we'll see if we can't clean up this wound."

The doctor paddled around his room, got hot water and an old and battered medicine case, poured boiling water over some instruments, and set about cleaning and cutting away infected flesh from the wound. During that time he might have been a surgeon in a city hospital. When he had finished and put clean bandages on the wound, he said:

"I haven't any plaster of Paris, and I

can't make a cast for that leg. I can put splints on it, but the man will be moving from time to time, and it will more than likely heal crooked."

"But will it heal?" Wardell asked.

"It will if you keep it sterile," the man said. "Otherwise—" the doctor shrugged. "Stick around," he added. "I'll see you later." Then he got his hat and went out.

Time dragged. Wardell sat by the boy all day, changing the wet dressing on the angry wound, giving him sedatives and drinking water, and late at night the doctor came back in—reeling drunk.

For three days the doctor woke up sober enough to dress the leg, and went out and came in drunk in the night, and in the meantime the youth's fever reached its climax—and on the morning of the fourth day the fever had broken. The crisis had passed.

And during the fourth day, the three wagons of merchandise rolled into Pinetop. Dave Bunch and Dorn and Pop crowded into the doctor's shack, and grinned at Kiowa who was showing the first signs of his recovery.

"Just got you here in time, didn't he?" Bunch asked.

Wardell said, "You just got here in time. Don't unhitch your teams. We're pulling out as quick as you can get Kiowa into his wagon."

"What's the hurry?" Droopy asked. "This town looks like it might be able to produce a drink."

"It can, and that's why we're leaving. The good doctor has been asking some mighty pointed questions in the last few days, trying to pump me, and I think he's finally figured out Mallin's brand on the mules I drove here. I want to get out of these hills before the sun sets."

Droopy complained, Pop looked hurt, and Dave Bunch took a big chew of tobacco, but Wardell pushed them into getting his team harnessed and Kiowa into the wagon. They pulled out quickly, driving through the town and hitting the downgrade toward Reynolds Valey.

A mile out, Wardell pulled them up. "Now I want you to reload that merchandise so there'll be a hole in the middle of the load in each wagon. Kind of breastworks. Droopy, open some of those boxes of dynamite in your wagon, and fuse a dozen or so sticks. And cut the fuses short—about three inches. That'll give us fifteen seconds from the time we light it till it explodes.

"Dave, find that big box with the cigars in it, and pass 'em around. You boys keep a cigar lit in your mouths all the time—to light fuses with. And keep your rifles and six-guns handy every minute."

"What are you expecting—a war?"

"Something," Wardell admitted. "There was something funny about that town—not a person dropped in to have a talk with me or see Kiowa. They didn't want me to see their faces, I figure, so I wouldn't recognize them later. Anyway, it was too quiet. That's why I wanted to keep going. I figure they'd expect the rest of you to hang around a while after you got there, and I'm hoping to get away before they can organize anything."

THEY rearranged the merchandise so as to leave the drivers in a protected hollow in the bed of each wagon, surrounded by boxes and bales and kegs of nails and loose, fused dynamite sticks, and they set out again.

Wardell's hopes of getting away were soon destroyed. They had got down the mountainside another hour's run when they found the road blocked by two horsemen abreast. Wardell heard a horse whinny in the brush and knew that there were others in hiding, probably surrounding them. He did not pull his team to a halt as one of the men with a rifle across his saddle held up a hand to stop him.

"Get off the road, man," Wardell shouted. "We're coming through in a hurry."

"Hold it up," one of the men shouted, and had to move his horse aside as Wardell's animals came abreast of them.

Wardell had been driving with his pistol in his lap, his reins in his left hand. He scooped the gun up and said, "Move that

rifle, mister, and you'll get it quick."

The man shouted, "All right, give it to 'em, boys," and suddenly pushed his horse off into the brush. A fusillade of shots came from the brush. Bullets whistled through the tarp cover of Wardell's wagon as he slid back into his protection of kegs of horseshoes and nails.

He gathered up a fist full of dynamite sticks with their short fuses, then jumped quickly forward again, stepping half out of the wagon, one foot on the tongue. He lighted the short fuse to one stick with his cigar and threw it into the brush into which the first bandit had moved. In fifteen seconds the dynamite exploded, and there was the threshing sound of frightened animals in the woods. Then came other explosions as the other drivers threw their dynamite sticks into the trees along the road. The woods danced with the blinding flashes and deafening roar of the explosives, and Wardell heard the threshing of several horses as they panicked and tore through the undergrowth, to the accompaniment of the curses of their riders who tried without effect to get them back under control.

The four-mule teams hitched to the wagons also were frightened, and they went racing down the trail as fast as they could pull their heavy loads behind them. Wardell looked back at the youth lying on the bed of the jolting wagon, and saw a mixture of excitement and pain on the wrangler's face as they bumped downhill."

"Don't slow down for me," Kiowa yelled. "Keep going. I can stand it."

They emerged from the wooded hills shortly, before the thieves could reorganize and overtake them, and they pulled up in the open flats and waited a few moments with their rifles ready, but the raiders did not risk following them into the open.

Wardell said, "I guess that's it. The trouble is over."

"Over, is it?" Dave asked. "That was easier than facing Colonel Mallin. We got the worst yet to come."

"Then we go face him," Wardell said. "And you boys remember, none of this was your doing. You were just taking orders. It's my hide he'll skin."

"Far as I'm concerned," Droopy said, "I ain't running out on you. You didn't use Mallin's orders as an excuse to neglect Kiowa, so I ain't hiding behind your orders. Let the old man snort his smoke."

They pulled into the wagon sheds behind the Mallin Trading Company just after dark, and Wardell noticed particularly that the colonel did not come out to meet them. He got his animals cared for and the wagons under sheds, sent Droopy for a doctor, and went in to face the colonel.

COLONEL MALLIN wore sharp white mustaches and a white pointed goatee, and his hair was silver and parted on the side. He sat stiffly behind his desk, smoking a cigar. He bowed in his military manner when Wardell came in and sat down.

"I'm glad to see that you finally got here only a week late," Mallin said in his cool tone. "We had about given you up. Did you bring my goods with you?"

"Yes," Wardell answered wearily. "Some of it. I had to use about five hundred feet of new rope to get across the creek. I broke open the medicine and used some of that, and some of the cigars, and some of the dynamite. Also, I expect you'll find some of your bolts of cloth full of bullet holes."

"Indeed," Colonel Mallin answered, his face turning pink. "Maybe you'd tell me about your interesting trip."

"Yes, I will," Wardell answered impatiently. He was worn from lack of sleep, and from worry, and his temper was short.

He told the colonel in detail. "You told me not to let the wagons out of my sight, but I had to take Kiowa to a doctor, so I left the wagons. You told me not to go by Pinetop, but that was where the nearest doctor was, so I went there. You told me to be back in a week, and I couldn't get back that soon because I waited in Pinetop for the creek to fall and for Kiowa to

be fit to travel. You told me not to open any of the boxes of merchandise, and I opened quite a bit of it. Otherwise, I suppose I've done about what you wanted me to do."

The colonel took a big drag on his cigar and clouded his red face with smoke. He was silent a long moment. Finally, he said, "Young man, you've long wanted to have a wagon train of your own. Now you see what responsibility means. You had to risk losing your job to save Kiowa, and you had to make your own decision there. It was a heavy one for a young man trying to get ahead, balancing his own future against the comfort of a roustabout.

"But—you did the only intelligent thing a civilized man could do under the circumstances. A human life is worth more than all the goods a man can accumulate, and no man has the right to deprive another of his chance to live, no matter what the cost.

"You took your responsibility, and you handled it well. There's plenty of room in my business for a man who can do that. See that the young fellow has the best of care, and you and your men go rest up a few days. By then, I'll have a place where you can use that sense of responsibility."

Wardell got to his feet, exhausted. He was too tired to realize fully what this opportunity meant, but he knew that he had lifted himself up another step by his own bootstraps.

"Thanks, Colonel," he said.

"Don't thank me. I'm as satisfied as you are."

WHISKY—WESTERN STYLE

IT'S PERFECTLY true that a man could be shot in the old Frontier West for an offense as slight as refusing to accept a drink from a stranger. Yet when the quality of the then-time liquor is taken into consideration, it didn't really matter—for the fellow who replied with a "Don't mind if I do," was undoubtedly slated for an early grave anyway.

Imbibers, however, were warned in advance, by the graphically realistic names of most of the whiskies, which contained, incidentally, everything imaginable including burnt sugar and low-grade tobacco juice. Tangle Leg, for example, left its dupes stumbling along the board sidewalks—with one foot unaware of what the other was doing. Tarantula Juice was as good as a bite from a snake. Forty Rod brought the drinker to his knees in a hurry—approximately that distance away from the bottle. Taos Lightning was evidently the most potent of all—for with one drink lightning struck—and its victim was out.

The names of the places where the "poison" was purchased were equally descriptive with "Bucket of Blood" saloons dotting lots of the West. Another favorite title was "Eye Opener"—although after a short stay the visitor's did the reverse. But the most realistic handle was "Road to Ruin," with a slogan under the sign that gave the patron fair warning, by proclaiming in bold lettering, "Come In And Die."

But a man didn't have to buy himself a drink at any Western saloon if he wasn't so minded. Instead, he could amble in, spend the whole day reading a month's supply of newspapers (the only place in town, generally, where they could be procured), warm himself at the stove, and stroll out again, with all the cash he owned still reposing in his trousers. What's more, the first customer in any "drinkery" got his whisky for nothing—and could go from saloon to saloon, with the same understanding. Provided, of course, that he abided by the unwritten agreement that he'd come back sometime later and pay for the next round. Even then the management was certainly liberal—because the third or fourth drink was customarily free.

—*Rita Best*

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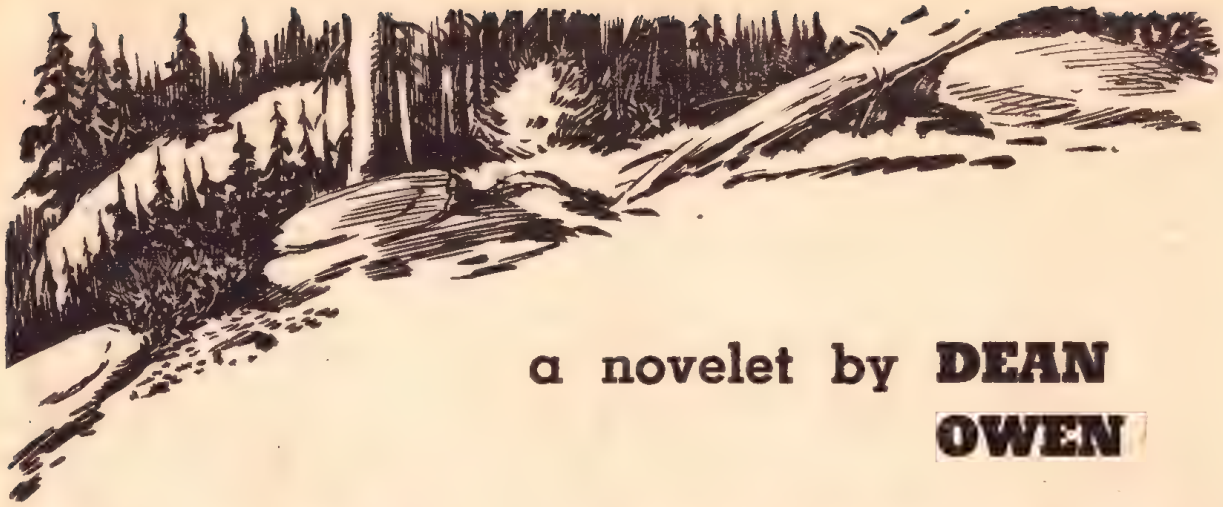
Mike Lambeth proved that it takes hot lead and equestrian dynamite to explode a trumped-up charge and banish a ghost



a novelet by **DEAN OWEN**

BLACK POWDER

CHAPTER I

Two Sides to a Story

MIKE LAMBETH tried to keep the fear out of his blue eyes, but he couldn't help his knees feeling weak. It affected him like that every time somebody suggested he hit saddle leather again. He felt miserable, standing there in the doorway of the rattletrap station beside the tracks at Casitas, a town nestled in the shadow of the Sierras.

"I ain't no ridin' man, Josie," he told the slim girl who waited for his answer. "Puttin' a rope on a bill of ladin' is all I'm cut out for." He tried grinning, but it didn't work.

Pretty Josie Todd, whose dad ran the Three Pines back in the hills, had a hurt look in her gray eyes.

"I thought you might do it for me," she told him. "Dad needs all the riders he can get to work roundup. Most of them have quit to dig gold over at Bonanza." She put out a slim hand in entreaty. "Please come out for a few days. Then you can come back here to your—job."

The way she said that last word hurt him worse than if she'd put a knife between his ribs. She was the one bright spot he had found in his six months at Casitas. Her friendship sort of made up for that bleak day a year before when his pard had been kicked to death by that killer horse, Black Powder. And he liked her father, a pleasant, gray-haired old cattleman.

"I wouldn't be no good on a roundup," he said lamely, and colored when he saw her looking at the scar an old rope burn made on the back of his right hand.

He looked out of place with a green eyeshade on his tanned forehead, a pencil stuck behind his ear. Tall and wide-shouldered, with sun wrinkles at the corners of his blue eyes, Mike Lambert was a typical range rider.

Josie studied him gravely.

"I'm sorry," she said, a bitter note shading her voice.

Both looked up at the sound of hoofs. Mike saw "Curly" Borkus and a gent known as "Long Tom" ride across the cinders. Mike's blue eyes hardened at sight of the pair. Ever since they had showed up in Casitas three weeks before a premonition had nagged him that they knew

of the past he preferred to keep buried.

"Josie, tell your dad I'm sorry," he said. "But I just wouldn't fit in."

THE two riders drew rein. Long Tom was handsome in an untamed way, but his face bore the mark of long trails, and his yellow eyes stabbed coldly at the world. He wore a black hat with a chin strap, his leather jacket was cracked and dusty, and at his hip was a big gun.

He swept off his hat and dismounted before the girl, an amused light in his eyes.

"Couldn't help overhearin', ma'am," he said smoothly, and nodded at Mike. "Ask him why he won't ride. Must be some mighty important reason that a gent who bears the mark of a rope and saddle man will work in a freight office instead of a roundup camp."

Mike's temper showed in his burning eyes. He saw Josie flush angrily. It seemed that every time she came down from the Three Pines lately, Long Tom was around. Mike's big fists clenched and he gave Long Tom a hard stare.

"Why don't you two gents ride for the Three Pines?" he said levelly.

Long Tom looked up at Borkus, who still sat his saddle, pasty face inscrutable.

"We got other things to do," he drawled.

The dark-haired girl turned away from Long Tom with a toss of her head. The man's lips went tight as he glared at the lissome figure in checked wool shirt and canvas riding pants. Long Tom grabbed his reins angrily and walked stiff-legged out of the yard, Borkus following.

And right then and there Mike knew that he and that big yellow-eyed spur-jingler would be tangling before long.

Josie bit her lip, and made one last plea.

"I was hoping you'd come out for the rodeo. We always have one at the ranch after roundup. All the spreads in the mountains get together. And there'll be a dance."

Her eyes widened when she saw the bitterness that flooded his face.

"I never want to see another rodeo," he snapped, and instantly regretted his harshness.

He wanted to tell her not to lose faith in him, that he just couldn't ride again, not now—maybe some time. But he couldn't say a word as he watched her climb into the spring wagon she had driven down from the ranch.

As Josie drove away she didn't wave to him as she usually did, but whipped up the team instead, and the wagon rolled up the street toward the three lone buildings which comprised the mountain town of Casitas.

When Mike turned, Borkus and Long Tom were sitting on the baggage truck, swinging their heels. Long Tom gave him a cold grin.

"Even the gal can see through you," he needled.

Mike felt his temper flaring, and he wished he had a gun. But he hadn't worn one for a year—not since that day at the Carson Rodeo.

"Number Seven's due," he said. "Mebbe I'll have to use that truck you're settin' on."

Borkus turned a pasty face that looked as if it had seen the sun only through prison bars. Curly and Long Tom were a hard pair, and Mike knew they weren't hanging around Casitas for the climate.

"You got a fast tongue, for a gent who same as murdered his best friend at the Carson Rodeo last year," Borkus said.

"Shut up, Curly," said Long Tom. "You want the kid to tuck his tail and hit for the hills?"

Long Tom got off the truck, big hand over his gun. Mike felt as if his ankles were chained to an anvil, but it wasn't fear of Long Tom. It was a numb feeling that swept him every time he thought of Larry Rule and that fateful ride on Black Powder. And now he knew that what he suspected was true. These men knew all about his past.

A TRAIN whistled far down the track, but Mike wheeled into the station. There were deep lines on his face, for being saddlemate to plenty of trouble had changed him from a reckless kid into a bitter man. Once he had liked nothing better

than hearing the yells of the crowd at a rodeo, or feeling a bucking horse beneath him. But now fear had made him lose what he wanted more than anything else in life—Josie Todd.

Inside the station old Charley Hines, the agent, lifted his bald head from the table when Mike came in, the light that drifted through the window reflecting the russet in his hair.

"I'm quittin'," Mike said. He threw down his pencil, tossed his eyeshade on the table.

The old agent took a drink out of his Wednesday bottle, wiped his lips.

"Huh, you can't run off and leave me," he said. "I'd have to do that cussed freightin' myself. That'll cut into my drinkin' time."

Mike was quickly aware of the agent's studied attempt at joviality.

"You ain't foolin' me, Charley," he said bluntly. "You got somethin' on your mind."

"Well, I couldn't help overhearin' that little argument you had with Josie," Charley Hines said. "And, son, it's like this: A gent has to learn to face life, instead of runnin'. Me, I took to drinkin' because life got me down. I'm too old and ornery to change, but you're a young feller." He raised his eyes to Mike's tight face.

"What you gettin' at, Charley?" Mike said, but realized that both knew what it was all about.

In the distance could be heard the rattle of old Number Seven coming up the Casitas grade.

Charley Hines filled his pipe. "I know you was comin' along to bein' a top money rider," he said. "You and Sam Rule's kid brother Larry run hosses on a little spread you had next to Rule's SR over in Spring Valley. At the Carson Rodeo last year, you drew a outlaw hoss named Black Powder. You got drunk and Larry Rule made the ride in your place." He stared up through a cloud of blue smoke. "Black Powder killed your pard."

Mike clenched his fists so tight the veins swelled up on the back of his hands. "I never got drunk! I had one bottle of beer. After that, I don't remember nothin'."

"Why didn't you tell it that way at Carson?" Hines said. "That beer might've been doped."

Mike laughed bitterly. "Who'd have believed it? I got a hunch that Rule's foreman, Hatch Kilgore, had a hand in it. Sam Rule told me he'd kill me when I sobered up. It was me or him. I didn't want to gun him, so I've been runnin' ever since, till I hit Casitas."

The telegraph key began to chatter, and old Charley Hines turned to it.

"Them two strangers, Borkus and Long Tom, was tellin' the whole story up at the Welcome Bar last night," he said. "I'd keep an eye on them two."

Old Number Seven came wheezing into the yard, and Mike, in the doorway of the freight office, lifted a heavy hand when the engineer waved. He was completely numb at the thought of leaving town, and especially the thought of leaving Josie Todd left him feeling all hollow and cold. But Mike couldn't face Josie after what Long Tom and Borkus had told.

Folks wouldn't stop to figure that there might be two sides to the story. All they'd know would be that if Mike had made his ride, Larry Rule would still be alive.

Then a shock raced through him as he saw a familiar figure in the open doorway of a freight car. A blocky man with iron-gray hair.

"Sam Rule!" Mike exclaimed. And beside Rule was Hatch Kilgore!

No retinue of cowhands this trip, just the two of them. To see Rule here in this one-horse mountain town was unbelievable. Yet there he was, bellowing orders in his familiar rasping voice.

A hundred times Mike had heard that voice in his dreams and seen Sam Rule coming at him with a gun. You couldn't pull a gun on the man who had raised you, given you a home. An orphan, Mike had gone to work on the SR when he was twelve, and Larry had been about the same age. Sam Rule was a good twenty years older.

Then in the passing years, Sam Rule had given Mike and Larry a strip of range

where they had raised buckers for the rodeo circuit. And Mike had become quite a rider, winning all the honors. At first Larry would grin, saying he didn't care, but in time it became plain he didn't like the idea of playing second fiddle to Mike Lambeth.

But Mike brought himself back to the present. Out there in the station yard a runway was lowered from the box car. And Hatch Kilgore, his red hair sticking out from under his sweaty hat, was leading a big black horse out of the car. Black Powder!

CHAPTER II

Too Late to Run

MIKE LAMBETH could do nothing but stand there as he saw that horse. Black as ebony, with a shining coat and mean eyes. Black Powder, the horse he had drawn at Carson Rodeo. The horse that had kicked the life out of his partner, Larry Rule.

He didn't try to figure out why Sam Rule had brought the killer horse. He wanted only to get away fast.

He saw that Curly Borkus and Long Tom had crowded their horses close and that one of them had hold of the rope around Black Powder's neck. Mike remembered that Black Powder was docile enough until a saddle was on him and someone tried to ride him. Then he exploded like a ton of black dynamite.

That day at Carson, when he had come to the rodeo grounds, bleary-eyed and lurching, as if he had been on a ten-day drunk, he had been just in time to see Larry Rule flattened against the board fence. Black Powder's hoofs had done the rest. Since that day, Mike had never been able to think about riding again. This job as Charley Hines' helper was as far from horses as he could get.

Borkus and Long Tom took Black Powder down to a corral beside the tracks, and Sam Rule hopped out of the car. Number Seven pulled out.

Mike had pulled a battered telescope bag from beneath the cot in the freight office where he slept, throwing in his belongings when Sam Rule's bellowing voice brought him swinging around. The SR owner's beefy figure blocked the doorway. His face was red and he had put on a lot of years since the last time Mike had seen him.

"Borkus and Long Tom said you was here," he told Mike. "I ain't wastin' breath." He patted a money-belt around his waist. "I got three thousand of your *dinero* here. Money from them hosses you and Larry—" His face went gray when he spoke his brother's name. "I sold 'em."

In his early forties, Rule was hard, dominating, and once he made up his mind he would see anything through in spite of brimstone or gunsmoke.

The two men stared at each other, tight-lipped as Hatch Kilgore came swaggering toward them, a crooked grin on his lips.

"I spread the word around the boss wanted you located," he said to Mike. "My two friends pegged you good."

Mike tore his eyes from Kilgore's big face with its heavy red mustache. He looked at Rule.

"You found me—now what?" he demanded.

"You'll get that three thousand, providin' you ride Black Powder in the rodeo out at the Three Pines next week," Rule snapped. "I been savin' that hoss for the day I found you."

The numb feeling left Mike's body, thawed out by anger.

"I don't want money that bad," he said.

Rule's slate-gray eyes blazed. "You ain't gettin' nothin' else from me. I was leavin' the ranch to Larry and you. Now it goes to Hatch Kilgore. He's the only friend I got left." His face twisted in fury, as he added: "And I'm hopin' Black Powder'll do the same for you he did for Larry!"

Kilgore had a satisfied smile on his face, and Mike caught the look that passed between Kilgore, Borkus and Long Tom. He didn't like what he saw.

All these months of running away, Mike

thought, and now he was right up against a wall. He played his cards in one desperate gamble.

"I wasn't drunk that time, Sam. That beer was doped. Ask Kilgore what he knows about a bottle of beer that was sent up to my hotel room. And somebody poured whisky all over me!"

Kilgore's green eyes narrowed, he started to shove past the ranch owner.

"You'll earn yourself a pine box," he snarled at Mike.

Rule held him off. "Take it easy, Hatch. You can settle with him later—if he's still alive."

"I've tried to keep out of your way, Sam," Mike said coldly. "I figgered I owed you somethin' for all you done for me. But get this! I ain't ridin' Black Powder, now or never."

There wasn't any humor in the smile on Rule's lips.

"I want to find out one thing," he said. "Either you was yeller or you sold out to the gamblers that day at Carson. Somebody put up a chunk of *dinero* that the SR entry wouldn't ride Black Powder. When you got drunk, Larry tried to ride in your place, 'cause the SR boys had bet their shirts."

Mike glared at the rancher, his temper spilling over.

"Larry made that ride because he was sore at me! Hatch Kilgore talked him into it. I thought a heap of Larry, but he was so jealous because I was winnin' all the prizes he couldn't see straight."

"You're a liar!"

Rule started forward, but Mike shoved him back.

"You're goin' to listen to me," he snapped. "There was a note on that bottle of beer. It was in Larry's handwriting. It said, 'Drink this, Mike, for luck'. I did, and that's the last I remembered till I got down to the grounds and seen Black Powder toss Larry."

Sam Rule's eyes were dark with hatred as he stared at the boy he had raised.

"You're tryin' to crawl. You're ridin' Black Powder, or I'll show you up for the yeller skunk you are. Then I'm puttin' a gun to Black Powder's head and blowin' out his brains and then I'm killin' you. So you better start wearin' a gun."

Mike's teeth flattened over his lips. "You won't give me a chance to prove—" Mike began, but Rule's angry face was shoved right into his own.

"You ran away from Carson," the rancher interrupted softly. "That was proof of your guilt."

"Yeah. If I'd stayed, you'd have killed me, or I'd have killed you."

Rule turned on his heel. "Don't try leavin' town," he warned. "I'm hirin' Borkus and Long Tom to ride herd on you."

When Mike went outside he saw Long Tom leaning against the wall, smoking. There was an arrogant smile on his lips and in his yellow eyes. Every step Mike took from now on would be watched.

IN THE CORRAL, Black Powder stood like an ebony statue, head held high, a magnificent animal. Before the Carson Rodeo, Mike had known he could ride the big horse. But thought of hitting the saddle on him now brought sweat to his brow.

Mike went back into the station.

"You knew Rule was comin'," he accused Charley Hines. "Why didn't you tell me? I'd been out of Casitas by the time him and Hatch showed up."

Hines scratched his bald head. "I thought of that, kid. But runnin' won't get you nothin' but a boot full of trouble. Better to stay and face it. You can get out of most any tight spot if you're a mind to."

"Talk's cheap," Mike snapped. "If I stay it'll only wind up with me and Sam Rule shootin' each other. 'Cause I ain't goin' to ride Black Powder."

Mike went uptown, conscious that Long Tom strolled not far behind. He wondered if Rule would go so far as to put a gun in his back out at the Three Pines and make him ride.

Casitas boasted only three buildings—a general store, a blacksmith shop and Pop Reynolds' Welcome Bar. But there were big ranches back in the hills and a lot of freight came through for them. Twice a year cattle were shipped out here. Pop

Reynolds and Sol Bolito, who ran the general store, were the only regulars left in Casitas, outside of Charley Hines and Mike. All the others had gone to help out with the roundup. Even Jake the blacksmith had gone to do his share.

Mike had to get out of town, but every time he moved, he found either Long Tom or Borkus on his trail. He had no horse, but figured he could give them the slip after dark. He could hike along the tracks and catch the early morning freight.

He went to the back door of the Welcome and into the kitchen, because Pop Reynolds always let him cook a meal back there. But when Reynolds heard the rattle of dishes in the kitchen, he came out from the bar. Previously Pop had been friendly, but today he was as cool as a January frost.

"I ain't wantin' you back here," he snapped. "I wondered what in blazes made you shy clear of workin' roundup. You're a yeller killer and seein' a hoss makes you shake like you had the ague. Now clear out of here."

Mike set his plate down on top of the stove and put the can of beans he had taken from the shelf back in place.

"Seems like folks always want to believe the worst," he said bitterly. "Never the best."

He went out into the bar. Curly Borkus sat at a corner table playing solitaire. Charley Hines was humped over another table with a half-filled quart of whisky at his elbow. Long Tom was not in sight.

Rule was at the bar with Kilgore. But it seemed to Mike that the big red-haired foreman was nervous about something. He had a hair-trigger temper and when that gave way, he was game for anything. That he was keyed up plenty now showed in the wild glint of his eyes, the tight set of his mouth.

"You made some fancy talk about me down at the station," he growled at Mike. "Tell Sam it was a cussed lie!"

"Don't get edgy, Hatch," Rule warned. "I only asked how come Larry sent Mike that bottle of beer."

The insinuation set Kilgore off. He came charging and a big fist came tearing at Mike's chin. But Mike sidestepped and put knuckles into the foreman's mouth. The next instant it seemed that all the months of pent-up bitterness were crowded into this one fight.

Mike stormed in and his hard fist smashed at Kilgore's nose. The blow sent the big man crashing back against the bar. Sam Rule said nothing, just stood there, a cold smile playing on his lips.

Borkus threw down his cards and got to his feet. But Charley Hines was still sprawled out, apparently dead drunk.

Kilgore's green eyes burned murderously.

"I'll kill you for that!" he raged at Mike and sent a hand toward his gun.

"Hold it, Hatch!" came Rule's warning shout, but it was too late.

Mike noted that Borkus had a stricken look on his face, as if something had gone wrong. But he didn't have time for a second look. His boot toe caught Kilgore on the knee cap.

The big red-haired foreman howled with pain and doubled up. Mike bored in, slamming him back with heavy blows. Kilgore dropped his gun, tried to stoop for it. A flailing fist sent him back on his heels. But the man recovered quickly and came tearing in with heavy knuckles.

NOBODY made a move to interfere. Mike Lambeth, outweighed a good twenty pounds by the hulking Kilgore, didn't have much of a chance. He knew it—unless he could get in a lucky punch.

Breath whistled through Mike's lips as Kilgore put a fist at his belt buckle, but Mike retaliated in kind. Kilgore was tough, hard and fast. And Mike knew the big man would gradually wear him down. But he kept at it gamely.

"That's enough, Hatch!" Rule shouted. "He's got to be in shape to ride Black Powder!"

Mike turned to look at Rule. And at that moment, Kilgore rammed a fist at his jaw. White light spilled over his eyes and he folded up on the sawdust.

"At least you can take a beating," Rule

said, looking down at him.

Mike staggered to his feet, gripped the bar for support, glaring at the man who had raised him. And he swore until there was no more breath in his lungs. Rule took it, but his face hardened and two veins throbbed noticeably on his forehead.

"If I was Sam Rule, I wouldn't turn my back on Mike Lambeth," Curly Borkus said.

He looked at Hatch Kilgore, and Mike saw the wink that passed between the two men.

Then Mike turned to the table where old Charley Hines had been slumped a moment before. But the station agent's eyes were clear now. He slipped a long-barreled .45 back under his coat. Kilgore caught the movement.

"What was you goin' to do?" he snarled.

Old Charley grinned and poured himself a drink. "Just wanted to make shore the kid didn't git tromped."

CHAPTER III

Death Plot

SAM RULE had nothing to say when Mike Lambeth lurched out the doorway and breathed great gusts of pine-scented air into his tight lungs. Across the street Josie Todd's spring wagon was pulled up in front of the general store.

Every muscle in Mike's body ached, as if he had just climbed out of the saddle of a tough bucker. He went to the pump beside the watering trough in front of the Welcome Bar. Cold water on his head drove out some of the pain.

Vaguely uneasy he looked back inside the bar. Kilgore and Sam Rule seemed to be arguing. Then across the street, Josie came out of the general store. Fat, dark little Mrs. Bolito came out on the porch with her.

In a moment Sam Rule walked out of the bar. Kilgore followed him, and neither one of them saw Mike. There was a harried light in the foreman's green eyes. He touched Sam Rule on the shoulder.

"We'll get another hoss," he said, urgency in his voice. "Stay over tonight. We'll all ride to the Three Pines first thing in the mornin'."

But Rule shook his head and stepped off the boardwalk. "I'm ridin' with the gal if she'll let me."

Mike saw Rule go up to the wagon, saw him take off his hat to Josie.

"I'd be obliged for a lift out to the Three Pines," he told her. "I'm Sam Rule. Me and your daddy used to ride for the Turkey Track over on the Bench."

A wan smile touched her lips. "I remember Dad mentioning your name. Of course you're welcome to ride."

She climbed into the seat, and Rule climbed beside her.

"There ain't one hoss in town outside of Pop Reynolds' saddler, they tell me," he said. "I'm mighty obliged for the lift."

Mike got off the bench where he had been sitting, walked to the hitchrail. Josie saw him and an angry flush came into her cheeks.

"The reason there aren't any more horses in town is because the other men have gone to the ranch to help Dad," she said to Rule. "Those who were willing, that is." Her flashing eyes raked over Mike's face as she spoke.

Just ten Long Tom came across the street from between two buildings and approached Rule.

"Reynolds says that Kilgore can rent his hoss tomorrow," he announced smoothly. "We'll bring out Black Powder." He shot a glance at Mike. "And that other thing we was talkin' about," he added.

Rule shot Mike a hard look. Then Josie picked up the lines and the wagon rolled up the street.

"We'll be meetin' again soon, I hope," Long Tom called after the girl.

But she didn't look around. She drove tight-lipped, her dark curls flying in the breeze.

Shadows were beginning to lengthen and Mike knew that if he was going to make a break, he would have to be at it.

He thought of Josie and how she had looked on the wagon seat. He would carry that last picture of her with him no matter where he went.

Hunger began to gnaw at his stomach, so he slipped around the other side of the building and into the kitchen back of the bar. He would need food. No telling when he would eat again after he hopped the freight in the morning.

He knew it was foolish to run. Maybe he should call Sam Rule's bluff and ride the black horse in the Three Pines Rodeo. But whenever he envisioned riding that ebony demon, all he could remember was Larry being trampled by the black's hoofs. Still, he ought to conquer the fear that had gripped him before it destroyed him. What was it old Charley Hines had said about running away?

But even as these thoughts went through his mind, he was moving carefully in the kitchen so as not to make any noise. He took down crackers and cheese from a shelf and some dried beef. He stuffed these in his pocket and left a silver dollar on the stove as payment.

HE WAS headed for the door when he heard low voices. Hatch Kilgore talking out to someone near the back door.

"Rule goin' with the gal has put a crimp in our plan," Hatch said in a worried voice.

Long Tom laughed shortly. "It'll be easier. We'll take care of Rule like we planned, at Squaw Pass. Me and Borkus can't wait. We're law bait. We've hung around here too long as it is."

Kilgore's voice rose a notch. "Play it safe, you fool. Lay off makin' eyes at that gal. We better hold off a day or two and figger somethin' else out."

"The gal is kinda purty at that," Long Tom said craftily.

Inside the shadowy kitchen, Mike Lambeth's blood boiled when he heard that. But he held onto himself, waiting to hear more.

"We got too much at stake to take chances," Kilgore said in a warning tone.

"You got too much at stake. We ain't. We're gettin' that three thousand Rule is carryin'. You'll wind up with the SR and your skirts are clean. We're takin' the risk, and you'll come off with the best hoss ranch in Spring Valley. Unless Rule changed his will all of a sudden, you'll be top dog."

"He ain't changed it," Kilgore snapped. "But I don't like mixin' with the gal."

"You're gettin' like an old woman," Long Tom said. "I've knowed you plenty long, Kilgore. I don't know nothin' good about you. If Mike Lambeth knew for shore that you doped his beer at Carson and sicked Larry Rule onto riding Black Powder, he'd blow you out of your boots."

"Well, he don't know it," Kilgore snapped. "Anyhow, he can't prove it."

"But Rule might like to know. Just remember that, if you're figgerin' on a doublecross. You take care of Mike Lambeth at this end like we planned. We'll fix Rule. Either that or we'll ride and tell Rule about the whole deal. That ought to rate us some *dinero.*"

Kilgore drew a deep breath. "All right."

Mike looked around in the kitchen, trying to find a weapon. There wasn't a thing he could use. Outside, he heard boots on the hard ground as the two men moved away, enlarging on the plan of action.

Panic surged through Mike Lambeth. He had visions of Josie going through Squaw Pass on the way to the Three Pines. And he remembered the way Long Tom had looked at her.

In the saloon, he heard a man go out through the swing doors and guessed it was Borkus. In a moment came the sound of two horses moving away in the twilight. Long Tom and Borkus going after Sam Rule!

The skin over Mike's cheeks tightened and he stepped into the bar. Charley Hines was still at the back table, but he was really getting drunk this time.

"Pop" Reynolds, behind the bar, scowled at Mike.

"Thought I told you to stay out of there," he said coldly.

But Mike didn't answer, trying to collect his jumbled thoughts. He had overheard enough to know what they planned to do

with him. Kilgore would get him out of town, knock him over the head. Sam Rule would be shot down. In the morning they would find Mike Lambeth beside the tracks opposite Squaw Pass.

Kilgore would say it looked as if Mike had potted Rule, tried to hop the freight, and had got killed. There wouldn't be much argument, because folks around Casitas would believe Mike Lambeth capable of just about anything.

THEN from the back table, old Charley Hines began to sing in a high, cracked voice. Mike got an idea. He walked over to the old station agent who looked up, bleary-eyed.

"Whasha matter?"

Mike slipped a hand inside old Charley's coat and came out with a long-barreled .45 which he stuck in his belt. Then he strode to the bar.

"I'm borrerin' that saddler of yours, Pop," he announced grimly.

He started for the door, but Pop Reynolds swung up a shotgun.

"The devil you say! Hatch Kilgore has already rented him."

Mike knew that a man didn't argue with a shotgun, for one touch of that trigger would cut a man to ribbons. So he told Pop about the conversation he had overheard out back.

When he had finished, Pop shook his head, but there was doubt in his eyes.

"Don't sound straight to me," he said, none too convinced that it wasn't.

And at that instant Hatch Kilgore stepped through the doors, his narrowed green eyes boring into Mike's face.

"I heard what you said," he accused. "And you're a liar!"

Desperation was in his face which was still raw from Mike's battering fists, and one corner of his mouth twitched. He looked big and ugly. Mike stood there, legs braced, waiting for his next move. Old Charley Hines had quit singing and was squinting to get his eyes in focus. Pop Reynolds laid a hand on the shotgun and Kilgore shook his head.

"Lay off that, Pop," he warned.

Then his nerves snapped. He pulled up his big six, just as Mike made a grab for the gun in his belt. Mike's weapon caught in his shirt. Kilgore fired, but Mike hit the floor on one shoulder and the bullet took out the back window with a jangle of glass. Charley Hines ducked under the table. Pop Reynolds was out of sight behind the bar.

Mike was rolling, but he was bringing up his gun. He threw a shot from the floor before the SR foreman could drop the hammer of his own gun. Kilgore staggered to one side and backed out the door. He sent two more shots winging through the slatted doors and Mike went flat as the slugs buzzed over his head.

Then came the sound of rocketing hoofs and Mike knew that Kilgore had mounted Reynolds' saddler which had been at the hitch-rail. At the door, Mike wasted two shots, for Kilgore had put the general store between himself and the Welcome Bar.

Pop Reynolds was just emerging from behind the bar. Mike shot him a bitter glance.

"Now will you believe me?"

Pop didn't say anything and Mike leaped to the back table and hauled Charley Hines to his feet.

"Get down to the station and do some key-punchin'," he said hastily. "Get word to the sheriff at Visalia. He can get a posse and cut 'em off before they reach Squaw Pass."

The old telegrapher hung onto the table for a moment, then grinned crookedly up at Mike.

"I knowed you wouldn't run away from trouble, kid," he mumbled, and as he lurched out the door he didn't seem quite as drunk as he had a moment before at the table.

Pop Reynolds licked his lips nervously. "What can we do?" he demanded. "There ain't another hoss in town. What if the sheriff don't get there in time?"

But Mike knew what he had to do and the realization made his nerves taut as fiddle strings.

"Get an extra saddle," he snapped at Pop.

POP REYNOLDS nodded and hustled out. Mike walked stiff-legged down the boardwalk and in a moment Pop came after him, lugging a heavy saddle. Mike took it.

"What you aimin' to do?" Pop asked.

Mike whirled on him savagely.

"Do?" he echoed. "There's only one thing to do. I'm goin' after 'em—on Black Powder."

The old man panted along at his side, turned wide eyes on him.

"That hoss'll kill you!" he protested. "He ain't never been rode, Sam Rule said so."

There was no answer from Mike. Sol Bolito was trudging in their wake by the time they reached the corral where Black Powder was penned up. Old Charley Hines came out of the station, ran toward them at a staggering gait.

"Somebody's cut the wires!" he gasped. "I can't get through."

Mike's lips thinned out across his tanned face. "And there ain't another train through tonight," he said grimly.

When Charley Hines learned what Mike intended to do, the last vestige of his drunk fell from him like a mantle. His eyes lighted and he slapped Mike on the back. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. There weren't any words that could say what he was thinking. That was a tough horse to ride and Mike had been dogged by that gnawing fear ever since he had seen Larry Rule crushed to death under those flashing hoofs.

Mike got a rope on Black Powder, opened the corral gate and led him outside. The horse pranced and snorted, but Mike got him snubbed up close to the corral bars. They didn't have a blindfold so Pop Reynolds tore off his old white shirt. Mike was able to get that over Black Powder's eyes without getting his insides kicked all over the place.

Getting the bit between the horse's teeth was a job and Mike just missed getting a couple of fingers chewed off, but he made it. The big horse trembled and snorted angrily when they dropped the saddle in place, cinched it down.

Pop handed Mike a quirt. Charley Hines gave him a pocketful of .45 shells. Mike ejected the empties he had used on Kilgore, reloaded the weapon and shoved it back in his belt. Then he climbed the corral fence.

"Yank off the blindfold the minute I hit leather," he told Charley Hines. "Make it good. We won't have another chance."

"Good luck, feller!" Hines said through tight lips.

"Me, too," Pop Reynolds added.

Old Sol Bolito just stared, his dark eyes wide.

Every nerve tight, Mike nodded at Hines. He dropped into the saddle. Charley Hines yanked off the blindfold and leaped agilely on the corral fence.

CHAPTER IV

Killer Horse

BLACK POWDER exploded. Mike went straight up into the air, lost his hat on that first jump. The big horse sunfished and Mike hung on, gripping the reins in stiffened fingers.

Black Powder twisted and buck-jumped and Mike pulled him clear of the corral by sheer strength, yanking on the reins until his left arm seemed as if it were being pulled from the socket. He knew from past experience that the big black outlaw was a fence buster. That was why he had saddled him outside the corral. Black Powder's favorite trick was crashing a fence, the maneuver that had cost Larry Rule his life.

The horse got the upper hand only for a moment, and streaked for the corral fence. Mike's heart went sliding right up into his throat. He pulled on the reins, but the horse slammed into the corral.

Mike pulled up his leg, got it back into the flying stirrup as the horse bounced off. Then Black Powder went to bucking again. Mike rode stiff in the saddle, and each time the horse came down it seemed to him that his spine would snap.

Relax, he told himself. He knew he would never last unless he did. Gradually he did, mainly because the picture of Josie Todd was before his eyes.

Then Black Powder lined out across the clearing. Like a black shadow he streaked over the ground, and Mike knew he had won the first round, for now there was no handy fence. This was the first time Black Powder had hit open territory with a rider on his back and he ran as if a racing prairie fire was at his tail.

A half mile of this, then he sunfished again, came down with jarring hoofs on the hard-packed ground. Blood ran out Mike's nostrils, down over his chin. His body still ached from Hatch Kilgore's fists, and this new beating was almost more than flesh could stand in one day.

Black Powder tried to rear on his hind legs, to go over backward. Mike beat him between the ears with the quirt and the horse broke into a run again. Mike's bones creaked with each jarring crash, but he hung on as if he were tied to the saddle.

And Mike breathed a prayer of thankfulness that there were no trees here, for Black Powder was running wild, but he was heading toward Squaw Pass and Mike let him go. Anyhow it would have been like trying to rope a runaway freight car to bring the flying black horse back to a halt.

This was no money ride, this was a ride for life. No cheering crowds, no flags, no music. Just a grim fight between a man and a horse.

Mike was thinking of Larry Rule as he hung onto that bundle of black horseflesh. Another mile of this and Black Powder had run himself out. His coat was sweat-marked and there was froth at his mouth. He made an attempt to twist around and take a chunk out of Mike's ankle, but Mike had ridden too many wild ones to be taken in by that trick. Again the horse reared and Mike beat him down. Black Powder didn't try it again.

When Mike turned the horse up into the hills, Black Powder put up only a mild fight. They were getting into high country. Far below he could see the wagon road where it snaked back and forth up the side of a mountain. This trail he was taking knocked a good five miles off the wagon road.

He figured that Kilgore would try and catch up with Long Tom and Borkus. He might let them go ahead with the plans for beefing Sam Rule, then try to talk them out of a cut of the three thousand dollars the rancher carried.

A rifle slug came whipping through the air to the left of Mike. He yanked Black Powder to one side. He was at the edge of a park, with hock-deep grass and pines that crowded close on rocky cliffs. Up ahead, was Squaw Pass, and to the right the wagon road. Five miles further on was the Three Pines, owned by Josie's father.

In the center of the park was Hatch Kilgore, wheeling his horse. Mike had drawn his own weapon. He saw the SR foreman shove his rifle into a boot under his leg, come up with a six-gun.

MIKE had to take a chance on Black Powder. Dropping the reins, he raised his gun just as Kilgore fired again. The man's shot went wide, for he was frenzied with anger, shouting crazily as he blasted away.

Mike squeezed trigger. Black Powder went straight up into the air. Even as Mike was falling, he cursed himself for taking a chance on the big horse. Black Powder wasn't broken to guns and that blast set him off.

Mike hit the ground heavily, but didn't lose his grip on the gun. Breath was knocked from his body, but he hugged the ground as Black Powder swept by, flailing hoofs just missing his head. When this momentary danger was over he felt the pain. It started up his leg and seemed to go clear up into his ribs.

Kilgore swung his horse around and came charging in. Mike wondered where Long Tom and Borkus were. If they showed up now, he was cooked. Not that he had much of a chance anyway, flat on his back, and with Hatch Kilgore coming toward him at a dead run.

"You messed it up!" Kilgore shouted. "But you're payin'!"

He fired. Pine needles and dirt slashed into Mike's face. Kilgore was too confident, and the crash of Mike's weapon drove a scream from his throat. He swayed in the saddle as he came tearing by. His plunging horse finished the job. Kilgore went into the dust on his head, all arms and legs. He didn't move again.

Mike tried to get to his feet, but pain knifed up his leg again. Silence was heavy here in the little park. He could see Black Powder, his reins tangled up in manzanita thicket. The horse was kicking, trying to pull loose.

Desperation seized Mike. He had to get that horse and pile into the saddle again. Josie would be coming along soon.

He thought suddenly that he might be too late. Long Tom and Borkus might already have shot down Rule. And Josie!

He heard voices then, carried to his ears clearly in the high mountain air.

He sat back down in the grass, gun gripped in his hand so tight his fingers ached. Scudding clouds tore themselves on the jagged peaks ahead, and out of that fog rode Long Tom and Curly Borkus. They sat their saddles at the edge of the park. Long Tom was leaning forward, peering into the shadows.

"That was Kilgore yellin'," he told Borkus. "Wonder what in thunder happened?"

Borkus fidgeted in the saddle, glanced back over his shoulder.

"Might be a posse. Mebbe we better give up the idea and ride."

Mike felt glad, for the man's words told him that Josie and Sam Rule had not passed here yet. The pair had evidently been bushed up further in the pass, attracted down here by the firing.

Long Tom snorted, while Mike lay still in the grass, his breath tight in his lungs.

"We cut the wires, didn't we?" Long Tom said. "Ain't no posse around here. But I aim to find out what it is."

Then Black Powder began kicking up his heels again, trumpeting loudly. Borkus pointed a shaking hand.

"It's Black Powder!" he yelled.

Long Tom pulled his gun, eyes scanning the trees and the grass.

"That cussed Mike Lambeth must have got back his nerve! He's the only one could have stuck a saddle on Black Powder."

"Mebbe somebody led the hoss," Borkus said.

Long Tom laughed. "Look at his coat. He's sweat-marked and he's been rode plenty."

They moved forward slowly. They were above a ten-foot bank lined with boulders. Then in the distance sounded the rattle of wagon wheels.

"Rule!" Borkus cried.

Mike Lambeth took a deep breath. His leg pained and he could not get to his knees, so he would have to play this out the best way he could.

He raised up to a sitting position in the tall grass. At that moment Borkus saw him and fired. Mike fell over on his side as the slug whipped a furrow across his neck. If he had been sitting up that bullet would have punched him right in the chest. Blood ran down his shirt collar.

USING his elbow for leverage, he blasted three quick shots. He could see Long Tom fighting his horse on the bank, trying to turn him down a narrow trail. Borkus got the benefit of one of Mike's slugs. He swerved to one side and fell, clawing frantically at the reins of his plunging horse. Then his limp body went sliding down a rock face, leaving a dark wet stain. He piled up at the bottom, one leg bent under him.

Long Tom was swearing like a madman, but he got his horse down the trail and into the park, while Mike prayed as he heard those wagon wheels draw closer. Josie was whipping the team to a gallop. Mike's mouth was dry and his heart sounded like an Apache war drum in his ears.

Bullets were hammering at him and Long Tom was trying for a finish shot, blasting away from the saddle of his curveting horse. As Mike threw his two last shots, he knew that he would have had no

chance at all if Kilgore, Borkus and Long Tom had been afoot. As it happened, the angry trumpeting of Black Powder, hung up there in the manzanita, helped spook their already jittery horses.

Mike didn't remember slamming his last two bullets. He just sat there pulling trigger until the gun clicked empty. He let it drop from his fingers into the grass, staring stupidly at the dripping blood that ran from a hole in his arm.

Then he looked up. Long Tom was out of saddle. His shirt front was wet and he was trying to walk. His horse moved a few feet away, stood there with trailing reins.

Mike smiled grimly as he saw Long Tom raise his gun. He had no chance, sitting there with no weapon. Then Long Tom swayed, his knees hinged and he sagged slowly to the ground like a felled tree.

Moments later a wagon with a gray-haired man and a girl in the seat came tearing into the pass. Above the rattle of wheels Mike could hear Borkus groaning over by the big rock.

Then he saw Sam Rule towering over him, a gun in his hand.

"You done a good job," he snarled at Mike. "I'm goin' to enjoy watchin' you hang."

Josie rushed by Rule and put her arms around Mike. Somehow Mike couldn't get his breath. He couldn't talk. His leg hurt like fury and he was light-headed, but he smiled at Josie and he felt a splattering tear on his forehead as she bent tenderly over him.

She made Sam Rule tear off a piece of his undershirt for a bandage. Then Mike saw him go over to where Borkus lay by the rock. In a moment he came back to the wagon, got a canteen and carried it to the wounded outlaw.

Mike didn't care about anything else. It felt good having Josie so close to him, and he felt like a man again, for he had stuck in the saddle and beaten down that fear.

A LITTLE LATER a posse came tearing up the slant and Sheriff Lem Cullen, a hard-bitten oldster, told Sam Rule how Charley Hines had patched up the wires and got a message through. And the old agent was sending a book over the wires, about how Mike Lambeth was riding Black Powder.

Rule came and looked down at Mike when they laid him in the spring wagon.

"Borkus done some talkin' before he cashed in," he said bluntly. "I reckon I made a big mistake in you. Kilgore kept me riled up so much about you all that time that I guess I went loco. But that big son figgered on gettin' my ranch. Well, he figgered wrong." He rubbed a big hand over his chin. "I don't reckon you'll be wantin' to come back to the SR."

He looked at Josie. She smiled.

"We'll come by and visit you," she said. "That is if you'll let us buy Black Powder. Mike says that he's got good lines and good blood. He's got a past, but he can live it down. He'll make a real start for a horse ranch."

Mike hadn't said anything like that, but he grinned anyhow.

Sam Rule looked abashed. "I reckon I'll make you a present of that hoss. After all, Mike is the first gent that ever stuck on his back."

He tossed a money-belt to Mike.

"We don't need this," Josie said.

But Rule shook his head. "I reckon Larry would like to know that money from their hosses helped give you and Mike a real start."

Mike stared after the rancher. He still couldn't talk, for his jaw was swollen from Kilgore's fist. But he didn't need to talk, for Josie was saying everything for him.

★

Meet the West's Roughest, Toughest Trouble-Shooter

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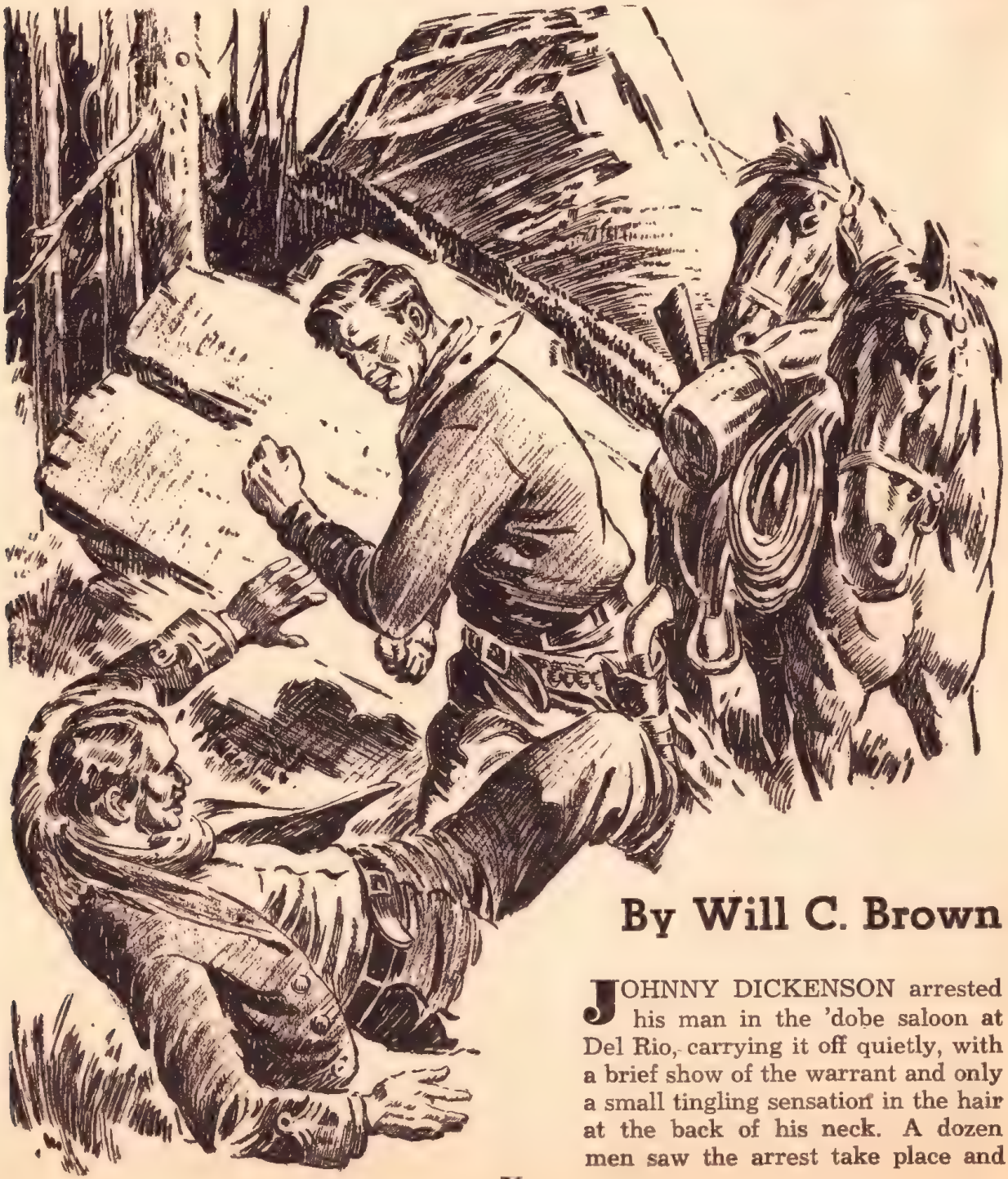
Under the very noses of scheming desperadoes, Deputy Sheriff Dickenson takes Comanche Joe toward the Cottonwood calaboose



By Will C. Brown

JOHNNY DICKENSON arrested his man in the 'dobe saloon at Del Rio, carrying it off quietly, with a brief show of the warrant and only a small tingling sensation in the hair at the back of his neck. A dozen men saw the arrest take place and

there was no disturbance. He had not expected any, there. If Comanche Joe's two sidekicks were around, they would make their play later. It would come somewhere on the long route back, out there in the scowling geography of the two hundred miles of scrambled and lonesome distance that stretched back-trail to Cottonwood.

All he had time to do was to let the tail of his glance slide over them, wondering if one might be Tolison. He gun-motioned Comanche Joe to the street. The big sandy one, apart in the dim room, with raw beef face. Tolison? Might be. It was something that would just have to wait.

The town marshal's one-room shack on the river bank passed for law headquarters in Del Rio. The wheezy fat man, with energies as low as the sickly Rio Grande, looked up when the deputy sheriff from Cottonwood reappeared. Johnny was herding Comanche Joe ahead of him.

"Found him, huh? I was comin' to help you."

"Comanche Joe we knew for sure," Johnny said. "The other two we're just guessing at."

The marshal, perspiring and curious, looked over at Comanche Joe, an impassive dark rock in the corner of the room, then reached out to swat a fly. "You'll know before long, son."

The man from the north painstakingly made a smoke. He was weather colored, both clothes and hide. Pink young stubble and white dust caulked the faint sun creases around the solemn set of his mouth and mild blue eyes. He pushed an old hat upward with the slow movement of a long hand, wiping the sweat on his high forehead and blistered nose. He was tired, and here it was time to ride again. A prisoner and a pack horse would be like dragging anchors all the way back.

"You're pretty young for this—somebody ought to go along with you," the fat man puffed, squirming. "If I wasn't tolerably busy here— Er, might as well say it, friend, I don't see how you're goin' to make it."

"Those other two," Johnny spoke, feeling nothing but tiredness. "They'll hear about it, you think? If they didn't see it."

"I don't know this Tolison. Red, heavy-set, I hear. Uh, it don't pay me to ask a lot of questions around here. Yeah, they'll follow." The marshal shifted his eyes, as if to avoid seeing the trail and what lay ahead of Johnny.

THOUGHTFULLY Johnny looked over at Comanche Joe. "Way I figure, Comanche Joe is bait. They'll be worried that the 'breed will call names when we start working on him. They know his kind don't take physical pain. Sheriff Dodson will know how to do it when we get back."

"If you get past Dead Squaw, you might dodge 'em."

Johnny went out back to check the mounts. They would make that impassive, dark hulk talk, all right. In Cottonwood, they had known that Comanche Joe had been one of the three who held up the store that night and killed Mike Tooley. Mike had spoken that name, before he bled to death from the bullet in his stomach. The 'breed's kerchief mask had slipped down.

Sheriff Dodson had speculated that the man known as Tolison would be the main one. Tolison and some other border character had been reported in Central Texas. It was Tolison's style of job. Comanche Joe would have been only a figurehead—he knew the lay of the land in Cottonwood.

It was immediately after the funeral when Johnny had asked Dodson to swear him in. "You got no deputy," he had said. "Not an organized county south of us. Somebody ought to be riding, looking for Comanche Joe." Dodson had given his grim warnings in vain. Mike Tooley had been father, family and boss to Johnny, ever since the lean, straw-haired youth had drifted into Cottonwood, years before. So Johnny had ridden south to the border settlements. That was three weeks and many weary waterhauls and tense night camps ago.

The horses were ready. One for Comanche Joe, one for him, one for the supplies. He pulled out the crude wrist cuffs, made from a small chain and snap lock, and secured Joe's right wrist to the saddlehorn.

"Don't fall off unless you want to be dragged to death. You ride in front and look around when I say anything." He pointed north and tapped the butt of his Colt, still not certain whether the 'breed understood his words.

They would be in plain sight, leaving town. But waiting for darkness would gain nothing. He would get into the first small tide of shallow canyons before sundown and that would make him hard to find. He left on the rutted trail, following it for the first five miles, alongside and above the rocky creekbed, now dry. Then he kicked his horse to a faster gait, and signaled to Joe to pull off the trail to the left. A mile away he turned parallel with the dry creek again, bearing north, in a tiring up-and-down course over the blunt-topped mounds separating the shallow canyons and gullies.

Looking behind him, Johnny watched for dust clouds or moving figures, and once he called a halt for long minutes, listening for a message in hoofbeats.

"Here, drink some water." He took the canteen away from parched lips and handed it across to Comanche, and dismounted. With his free hand, the half-breed hungrily grabbed out and raised the canteen.

Might as well find out about Joe right here, Johnny thought. You need to know, in advance of trouble, what your man is like. Better now to learn his caliber, than later in a tight place. Unlocking the wrist cuff, he motioned for Joe to get down and stretch his legs. Johnny turned his back.

He walked off a half-dozen paces as if to inspect the pack on the lead horse, catching, as he turned away, Joe's smoky sidewise glance at the carbine in the saddle scabbard.

Bending over, pretending to examine a hoof of the pack animal, he heard the rifle scrape when it cleared leather, heard the gravel twist as Joe's feet whirled about.

The sharp, brittle *click* of hammer on firing pin was loud in the still of the afternoon. Turning, Johnny looked into the man's dark face, at the squinting eye beyond the barrel. Joe worked savagely at the lever, and the hammer clicked again.

Moving lightly forward, his lean muscles collected, Johnny pulled his left hand from his pocket while his right hovered over his Colt.

"Here they are, Joe!"

He opened his palm and showed the cartridges.

Comanche Joe's guttural was the oaths of all his ancestors. Then he lowered the carbine and looked sullenly at his feet.

"Put it back in the saddle." Johnny pointed. Joe awkwardly replaced the rifle.

JOHNNY hit him with a measured left swing, full into the mouth. Blood appeared instantly. Next, his right fist exploded into Joe's stomach, with all his shoulder and his long right leg helping pile-drive it along. Joe coughed, bending, and made strangling sounds. Johnny reached out and steadied him with his left hand, until the swarthy big face was a target again. Again his right fist crashed. It raised Joe's whole big frame, and more blood came. Driving his left, then the bloody knuckles of his right fist, fast into Joe's mouth and eyes, Johnny battered him down. He pulled Joe up from the rocks and weeds, balancing him. Joe groaned and swayed, half erect, eyes closed, holding his hands to his face. Johnny's shoulders moved back and forth like a cross-saw, each rhythmic swing firing fists into Comanche Joe's middle, and the man collapsed again in agony and was sick on the ground.

Sitting on a rock, Johnny rested and smoked, watching Joe come to, and watching the back trail. Far to the south, below them on the shelf of the dry creek, he made out a faint trace of dust tinting the high sheen of the cast-iron air. It could be anybody. Johnny prodded Comanche Joe to his feet. He gave him another

pull on the canteen.

Using the chain cuff again, he locked the prisoner's right wrist to the saddle-horn, replaced the ammunition in the carbine, and mounted.

"I'm boss, big Injun. Remember, if Tolison comes. You know white man with Tolison name? Know Cottonwood store? Bad shoot old man, heap money? . . . You talk now, Comanche Joe?"

The swarthy head sagged and only low moans came out. The crow-black shaggy hair was dangled by the hot breeze into the blood-crusted mouth.

"All right. Let's ride. You maybe talk in Cottonwood, Joe."

Before sundown the ridges grew steeper and the gullies deeper, forcing him to drift to the right again. That was a worrisome thing, for it pushed him back toward Old North Trail. Ahead now was the awesome sun-streaked ugliness of Dead Squaw Cliff. It saw-toothed northwestward like an interminable bad dream, sheer rock all the way up to the Sierra Blanca foothills. He would have to skirt Dead Squaw below its descending south slope where the rocky lacerations folded down country toward Dry Creek and on to the Rio Grande.

This would force him into the narrow funnel of territory through the shallow roughs at the foot of Dead Squaw, very near North Trail which here made its cut to squeeze through the boulders to the prairies beyond.

He sighted the riders toward North Trail just as he rode out of a little canyon. There were not two, but three. All he had time to notice was that they were traveling light and fast, and therefore were not ordinary travelers. Had they seen him?

Johnny was not sure, and the uncertainty was what put the taut pull in his throat muscles. He scrambled his horse back to cover, gun out, waving Comanche Joe behind scrub cedars, and trying to pull the pack horse, suddenly obstinate, back with him.

He waited five minutes. On foot, he squirmed up the ledge, but by then the riders were lost from sight behind the stubble of boulders and low brush. The land turned darker, and he finally could not see the distance.

"You see them? Was that Tolison?"

He got no answer and had expected none. After a while, he moved back north, but the going in that direction, he soon saw, was next to impossible. The horses were tiring.

Tolison and his men would know about how far he could get by night, towing a prisoner and pack mount. Yet, Johnny considered, there was no use working north or west—not with Dead Squaw and all hell's worst country out there to block his way. He would have to get through, somehow, in the vicinity of North Trail, a fact that Tolison would well know.

As the sun went away beyond the silent broken fastness behind him, he made cold camp in a ravine. His eyes were heavy for sleep and he was so tired he caught his knees trying to buckle when he herded Joe along to water the horses at a shallow hole in the rocks of a feeble spring. Then he ate, giving Comanche an equal ration of the cold grub.

ONE end of Comanche Joe's wrist chain he locked around the base of a sapling, as Sheriff Dodson had suggested that day when he was trying to cram Johnny with last-minute advice and warnings. Then he rolled smokes for them both.

"About midnight I'll switch it over to your other arm, so you can turn over and sleep on your other side."

The prisoner's face was swollen. He pulled silently on the lumpy cigarette through cut and crusted lips, head down.

Johnny picketed the horses in the thin grass along the trickle of water that oozed down from Dead Squaw. Taking the carbine, he bedded down in the cedars above the gully. Weariness as painful as slow death wracked his nerves and muscles. In spite of it, he found that he could not sleep. Every sense was strained and listening. Sleep approached, and then he was seeing Tolison, or hearing horses, or

seeing Comanche Joe or Mike Tooley, all bloody, appealing to him; and then sleep would back off, and laboriously approach again.

Tolison and his men would camp for the night, somewhere off North Trail. They would camp as he had camped, silent and without fire. In his troubled drowsiness, he could see them, bedded down in some ravine, knowing that their quarry would have to halt at night too, sure of running him down when day came. And if not the next day, then another.

Tolison would know that if Comanche Joe ever reached Cottonwood, he would talk, and then Rangers would begin showing up in the border towns with murder warrants. No, Tolison would not let him get over that trail with Comanche Joe—somewhere they would be waiting, three of them against him. Johnny thought that if he were in Tolison's shoes, he would ride fast toward Dead Squaw until he was sure he was past the distance that Johnny might make the first day. Then he would simply wait it out. They would know Johnny would have to come to them.

He stirred and sat up quickly, listening, unable to tell whether the quick alarm was inside him or out there in the dark. He heard faint movements of his horses. Below, a dark motionless form was Comanche Joe. Johnny got up and collected his gear. He took the carbine and went to the horses and packed. Then he went over and prodded Comanche Joe.

"Get up." He rapped Joe under the elbow to hoist his hands. He prodded the sleepy half-breed ahead and snapped the lock at the saddle-horn, this time leaving a longer length of chain.

"You'll walk now, Joe. Heap big walk. We got to get in front of your friends, Big Injun."

He had to get in front of Tolison. Tolison could trail him and catch up, of course, but that would be better than walking into an ambush. His best bet was to bypass Tolison in the night. He took the reins of the two mounts, after running a lead rope back to the pack horse from a saddle.

Now all he had to do was to walk over the devil's own terrain, around small boulders, through a sea of flintrocks of every conceivable shape, towing the horses, with Joe walking alongside the one he was fastened to. Walking would cut down their silhouettes on the rises, for one thing, and it would rest the horses.

Canyons, gullies, scrub brush, the rocks underfoot and thick darkness fought at him, conspired to beat him back. His legs churned across obstacles, aching without end. Once a coyote loomed ahead and faded immediately in the blackness, and Johnny found himself crouching with six-gun in sweaty hand, cursing his nerves.

Once he went back and transferred Joe to the other side of the horses, to ease the strain on the 'breed's arm, holding his Colt against Joe's back as he relocked the cuff.

Feeling softer alkali afoot, and old ruts of wagon wheels, he knew when he had reached Old Trail. He turned to the left, moving slowly, gun in hand, listening. Somewhere, to one side or the other, the three who hunted him would be camped. He felt his stomach tighten. The clod-clod of the horses, his own and Joe's bootsteps, sounded heavy. The minutes, then an hour, crawled by, and another, and they walked on in a black world.

Stick to the middle of the trail! He had to steel himself to do it, fighting the temptation to travel to the side, where there was cover. But that is what Tolison would expect.

He had to grit his teeth, had to keep saying it in breathless rhythm to his footsteps. Tolison and his men would be covering both sides. He must stay out here, depend on the security of the night —not move to the edges of the mile-wide space called the trail.

WHEN the challenge came, finally, from the blackness far to his right, he was almost glad. It broke the unbearable tension. His muscles relaxed.

The voice boomed out. "Whoever you are, halt or we'll shoot!" Then, "Hello out there—you, Comanche Joe? Is that

you? Comanche Joe—yell out, Comanche, if you're there!"

Johnny fell back to put the pressure of the six-gun against the half-breed's rib. Joe's footsteps faltered in indecision, then moved on, and Johnny pulled at the horses' reins and kept moving.

Lashing out from the night came the first shot. The bullet whined over them with the sharp bark of the explosion. Keep moving, keep the same gait, don't shoot back! Johnny steeled himself to keep a straight course. He prodded Joe again and tugged at the horses. The night would have to be his security, the center of the open trail his one chance. They would fire at the sounds, but they would keep a safe distance and sounds were deceiving in the utter blackness.

Bullets came near, a few of them, but he thought most were raking the sides of the trail, over along the rocky ledges that paralleled the pass. Then Johnny heard the closer sound, very near to him, off to his right. A single set of jogging feet. Tolison and his men had scattered and here was one advancing to the sounds of the horses.

"Hey, is that you Comanche Joe?"

It was not the first hoarse voice, so it probably was not Tolison. Johnny moved quickly to gun-pressure Joe for silence, but the half-breed suddenly succumbed to his desperation. Tugging in savage jerks at the chain that held him captive to the horse, he screamed out in mixed rage and terror. "Me Comanche Joe! Cottonwood white man got me! You run here—keel him! Don't shoot me—me Comanche Joe!"

The six-gun answered, not a dozen paces away. The lead slug made a faint breeze in front of Johnny's chest. He jabbed Joe viciously, then he turned the gun into the darkness where he had seen the powder flash. He squeezed slowly on the trigger.

A soft thud and the loud gasp came together, the gasp abruptly dying in the sound of something soft and heavy falling into the rocks.

One man less now. I'll catch it, though! His one shot would bring a fusillade, but maybe it was worth it—if he was lucky.

The answering fire kicked dirt and gravel all up and down the trail.

They can't do that forever—they won't have enough ammunition to keep it up. They don't dare come close. And they still don't figure me out here in the open trail.

It was time to ride, now. The horses had a few meager miles left in them. He was past Tolison, between Tolison and Dead Squaw. Now they would have to come to him.

He prodded Joe into the saddle, mounted his own horse, took up the slack in the lead rope, keeping a tight hold on the reins of Joe's horse. He kicked and pistol-rapped his mount into a gallop. New shots sounded back in the distance, and Johnny whipped and kicked, urging the animals ahead, until at last their hoofbeats were the only sounds in the night.

When he figured they had made four miles, alternately galloping and walking, he knew the horses were all in.; He pulled them into the roughs to the north of the trail, now almost under the towering flint wall of Dead Squaw's south terminus. He found a steep little ravine, running perpendicularly to the smoother expanse of the trail. Securing the Indian to the trunk of a thin tree again, he picketed the horses, found dark shelter, and immediately stretched out in complete exhaustion.

Tolison would move mighty cautiously today. Now Tolison was in the same fix that he, Johnny, had been in before—Tolison had to move toward the man he wanted to kill. Johnny guessed he could take it easy until mid-morning. He cradled the carbine to his chest and slept.

You make one bad guess, one miserable mistake, and that's enough. All the smart things a man has done before will not compensate. Johnny stared dully at the spot where Comanche Joe had been, and failure crawled over him like a sickness. In that empty spot he saw all his efforts and ordeal mocking back at him, all utterly wasted.

HOW long it had taken Joe to whittle through that green sapling, he could not tell. It must have been slow and painful. But the flint rocks all around underfoot in this land were, some of them, sharp-edged as hatchets, and who would have thought of that? He had left Joe surrounded by an abundance of natural knives and the smart Indian had cut his way to freedom. The twisted white fiber of the tree butt, the bloodstains of the thin edges of some of the flintrocks Joe had used, showed how the prisoner had tediously done it. Johnny went up on top of the ridge on numb legs to look over the countryside. It was empty, but any one of a hundred gullies or boulders might shield Joe.

The horses were still there, and that was something. Evidently Joe's one thought had been immediate flight. He had taken no chances of awakening the deputy and inviting a bullet. He would start back afoot, knowing that on the trail he soon would find Tolison and the other man, and then he could lead them to Johnny's hideout.

Old Mike Tooley, up there in the seared sky above Dead Squaw, would think he was a pretty dumb sheep, he reckoned. Sheriff Dodson, in all his advice, hadn't thought of the sea of flintrocks in that desolate country. A man was supposed to be able to think of a few things, himself. In this country, Johnny angrily mused, he *had* to—or he didn't live long.

He tried to follow Joe's tracks out of the canyon, but quickly lost them in the rocks. All he could tell was that the 'breed was headed back south, toward Old North Trail. Now it would be Johnny again who had to ride back into them, into sure ambush. Or strike out north, for home, empty-handed.

The ugly sides of Dead Squaw glowered down, splashed by morning lights and shadows. The great shadows took on all kinds of shapes and images. Up there, he could see outlines like Comanche Joe's big head, and old Mike Tooley in characteristic stoop, and shapes like sixguns and holsters . . . and all the time he was debating within himself, facing the hopelessness of it. Why not ride for the pass, and keep going?

Anybody would say he did the only thing he could do, to ride north and try to save his own hide. The fat marshal at Del Rio, the folks back in Cottonwood, even Sheriff Dodson—they would say he had simply done his best and failed, and that one man would have had no chance against three, anyhow. And Mike Tooley? What would his old boss say? He shut his eyes hard against memory of the old man who had raised and taught him, who once had said to the straw-haired, freckled waif, "When you can't do what you ought to do, sonny, you just keep a-tryin', else you might as well stop livin'. You're dead in the guts when you give up, and that's the most dead there is."

They had shot down old Mike, blasted his life out when he was unarmed and looking them in the eye. They would do Johnny the same way soon as they located him. Which might not be long, now, depending on when Joe had got loose and how fast he traveled.

Johnny slowly packed and saddled. He ran a lead rope back to the two extra horses, took his carbine out, balanced it in front of him, and turned his back on Dead Squaw. He rode out of the gully in the direction Comanche Joe had taken.

It was after one hour of up-and-down riding in the roughs when they spotted him. He came up a low rocky rise, making no attempt at concealment, his backbone iced with tension, his teeth locked to make himself keep going. The bullet and the rifle blast were almost relief, for they ended the uncertainty. That had been all he wanted to know—that he could find them and survive that first finding, that he would not be killed from the back. He hit the hard earth and the second bullet was closer, and the horses plunged and scattered.

The temptation was great to try to return fire, to make an effort to shoot it out. But there were no targets. They knew where he was. They would simply spread out in concealment, circling him

under cover, until he was exposed to a finishing shot. He hugged the rocky ground until he heard the crawling forms somewhere ahead, then a hoarse voice boomed across.

"You ain't got a chance, mister! Lay your rifle up on the top of that rock, then your six-gun, and stand up—slow!"

With one hand, Johnny fumbled until he found the size and shape flintlock that he wanted. He twisted until he could reach the back of his belt. Then he slid the carbine up and to the top of the boulder that sheltered him.

"Now your six-gun!" Tolison called. Johnny reached a hand up again to the shadow top of the boulder and placed an object alongside the carbine.

"Now stand up, with your hands reachin'!"

SLOWLY, he got to his feet, hands in the air, turned a little so that his empty holster would show.

Tolison appeared first. Johnny saw the red, dirt-crusted features of the heavy face as they materialized when Tolison came toward him. A dried-up thin man came out from the rocks, rifle ready, then Comanche Joe, the length of chain still wrapped to his wrist. Cautiously, then in rapid confidence, Tolison walked ahead.

"Watch him, Slim!" Tolison called back over his shoulder. Then to Comanche Joe, "Now, you sure that was all he had, Joe—the rifle and the six-gun?" Joe grunted an affirmative.

If they will only bunch together! Johnny prayed through his tight, blistered lips. Maybe when they come in between those last rocks—

Tolison came on in the lead, rifle a little relaxed now in his right arm. Slim sided him, a few paces to the left, and Comanche Joe was immediately behind. How near could he let them come—how soon would they notice what was on top of the boulder, partially obscured by the rifle butt and shadows?

Tolison's face was twisted into a vengeful grin, very certain of the situation. He croaked out a triumphant oath: "We got you now—mighty smart one, wasn't you? Next time they won't send a damn upstart to do a man's job!"

He was about to say more as he confidently stalked forward. But it was Comanche Joe's sharp eyes that first caught the trap, and Johnny saw it in Joe's expression even before he heard the 'breed explode into excited jabber. In that instant, just as slow comprehension broke over Tolison's face, Johnny tensed his knees and plunged.

He hit the sharp rocks to his left, clawing at the small of his back as he fell, and all he could see was Tolison's rifle coming up, Tollison's big belly and wide buckle.

He pulled the trigger of the Colt twice—unhurried and sure. That was all. Tolison was not erect any more. The rifle was sliding to the ground and the nickel buckle was turning red. The man called Slim was already supine, looking up at Dead Squaw with sightless eyes.

Comanche Joe had put his hands straight into the air, the chain dangling, his sullen eyes glazed with fear. "Don't keel me, Mr. Cottonwood. . . . Me go! . . . Me good. . . Me talk now! . . . It was him, Tolison. . . . He shoot old man."

Johnny picked up the flint rock from the boulder top. It was about the size and shape of the six-gun he had transferred to the back of his belt. It had served, for the few brief minutes, until Tolison had come into range. Tolison and Slim had been too quick to gloat over their triumph. "A good smart man," Mike Tooley had once said, "can beat a bad smart man, if he just keeps his brain a-churnin' and don't mind lettin' the Lord carry a little of the load."

Johnny, after he and Joe had caught the horses, locked the 'breed to the saddlehorn again. He rolled them both lumpy cigarettes and motioned a course toward the pass on North Trail.

"Let's go," he said patiently, "and don't try anything. I'm strawboss here, Big Injun. . . . The real boss," he added in a whisper to himself, looking above Dead Squaw toward old Mike Tooley, "is up there somewhere."

If a bear attacked a man, on whose side would you be? DAVE RITCHIE had an unusual answer!

Full of fighting savagery, the craglands killer came in

HOT LEAD FOR OLD SILVER

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

SOFT DAWN mists were beginning to writhe upward when Dave Ritchie awakened. He sat up with a start, scattering his blanket and soogan.

The incessant blatting of sheep had aroused him, not the ordinary routine blatting which always caused a cowman or horseman's lip to curl, but a sharper bleat that meant the woolies had been alarmed.

A huge cross-bred animal, half dog, half wolf, growled low and crowded close to Ritchie. He reached out a hand and gently rubbed one of the hybrid's ears. It was

actually only part of an ear; the rest had been torn off in battle with a young cougar.

"Woolies in trouble, Yan," the man said softly. "That sheepman Carey'll likely learn now that the advice he was given was sound. No country for tame sheep, Yan. We know, boy, don't we?"

Wolflike, the big fellow gaped his jaws and made a throaty sound. Yan hunted silently and only on occasion, in the clear moonlit nights, did he give answer to his wild kindred when they wailed. Dave had rescued him, as a whelp, from an Indian youth who was mistreating him. He had gentled the wildling by careful training. He talked man talk which Yan had quickly learned to understand.

"We'd best saddle a hoss and go take a look-see, boy," Ritchie said, getting to his feet and stretching.

He was still weary, for the wild horse band, which he had tracked for days, had led him a chase over tortuous mountain trails. Though he hated sheep, he had a sort of fellow-feeling for their owner, Tom Carey, who had had considerable loss since bringing his band up into the Lost Lake country.

"Might be I can persuade him that such hellions as Old Silver and prime lambs and wethers just don't get along in the same range, Yan. The longer he stays, the more he's bound to lose."

OLD SILVER was well named. He was a giant grizzly of great age, and his coat was frosted with hoary silver. Naturally he had welcomed the coming of the sheep.

For some years he had ventured down from his cragland haunts to make his forays on the cattle creatures lower down along the valley, but man had sharpened his alertness. There was an extra-bright silvery streak across the top of Old Silver's big dome, and under the silvery streak a line of hard cartilage where a bullet had ripped him on one of his early dawn hunting expeditions. For some time, man and his kind had pursued him into his mountain haunts, harrying him, giving him no rest.

For two years he had been forced to content himself with rodent life for food. He dared not even venture down to the creek riffles for a meal of fish.

The wild horse band, too, had become increasingly alert, and with his increasing years, Old Silver grew less and less inclined for long jaunts along the hunt trail.

So when the sheep creatures came into his country, he chortled throatily and choffed his great chops with pleasure. He struck them down infrequently and he struck sharply and ruthlessly. This was his range, and any creature that could not give him battle, was potential prey—food.

This morning, he had made his raid in the mist and with his powerful paws and great tusks had taken a heavy toll.

Now, screened by a huckleberry clump, he stood sniffing at a man and horse coming down an old elk trail. Old Silver's eyes were not so good as they had been when he was young, but his nose easily identified the man and horse creatures. He had often tanged their scent high up on the rocky trails.

He gave out a throaty grumble now and clamped a tusk more firmly on a limp, fat lamb as he shuffled off, making his slow climb to lose himself in the cloister of the almost inaccessible gorges where he would feast.

Trotting along a foot or so behind the horse's rear hoofs, Yan, the part wolf, made deep, though soft throat sounds. The tang of Old Silver had not escaped his keen sense of smell.

DAVE RITCHIE loped his horse around the easterly neck of Lost Lake. Ahead, the main band of Carey sheep stood huddled together, all their heads turned toward the hills and mountain range.

Ritchie glimpsed Carey. The sheepman was down, working over another man.

"Herder! He's likely hurt," Ritchie mused. "Hope he didn't actually tangle with the old silvertip heller."

Shortly he pulled his horse to a halt,

called Yan in and waved to Carey.

"What's happened, Carey?" he sang out. "Your man hurt bad? I heard the sheep way up at my camp. Figured something had gone wrong."

Carey's forehead was creased by a worried frown. He forced a smile and nodded.

"Thanks for coming, Ritchie. Yes, we've had trouble. That Old Silver heller killed five of my best Shropshires, including an important young ram that cost me plenty."

Ritchie knew that Carey was no ordinary sheepman who calculated only in terms of so much per fleece or so much per pound for mutton or lamb on the hoof. He was an intelligent breeder who hoped to make his money by producing the finest type of breeder stock — blue-blooded brood stock that would command top prices and take their share of prizes.

Ritchie dismounted and got down on his knees as the herder groaned. Dave winced when the wounded man winced.

"It's his right leg, Ritchie. Broken below the knee. He was stirrup-dragged a long way when Old Silver scared his horse. Do you think we — you and I— could set the leg?"

"I helped my dad set the off rear leg of a young blooded bull calf once, Carey," Dave answered. "This can't be much different. We'll try. Too bad you haven't a pint of whiskey handy. It will hurt, but we can't move him as he is."

Later, while Carey talked gently to the unfortunate herder, Ritchie went about his first aid. It was crude, but he calculated it would save the herder his leg; it would at least help him to endure the long haul out to the nearest town and proper medical care.

When at last Dave finished tying his crudely-fashioned splints in place, he slackened his lips, shuddered, and got to his feet.

"Thanks, Ritchie," Carey said softly.

Dave Ritchie was staring across the lake, where trout broke water as if welcoming the rising sunlight.

"Don't mention it, Carey," he answered. "Well, I hate to harp on this subject, but don't you think you've had enough loss to convince you the ranchers and trappers were right?"

"You mean you think I should quit, pack up and herd the band back to—to God knows where?"

In Carey's eyes there was a cold-steel challenge that Ritchie did not mistake for stubbornness.

"That's what I meant, Carey," he said calmly. "But it's no business of mine. Old Silver is old, and nothing could have suited him better than the coming of your sheep. I take it you're not like a lot of ranchers who have lost calves and such, and who insist that the likes of old Silver have no place in this world."

"And—have they any such place, Ritchie?"

A slow smile tucked up Dave's mouth corners.

"I'm no softie, Carey," he said. "But times, I wonder. That old heller hasn't had any bed of roses in all his years up here in the wilds. He likely had to battle all the way, for everything he got—long before the east valley ranchers and you came up. This is his range, Carey. Ever think of these wild critters from that angle?"

The wounded herder groaned, and Carey dropped to his knees to talk to the man as he came out of his semi-coma.

Ritchie watched the sheep owner gently wipe the herder's forehead, listened to Carey's soft voice.

"Just hang and rattle, Pete. If it's the last thing I do, I'll clear the range of that silvertip hellion. I—"

THE SUDDEN wild blatting of the sheep cut him off. He got to his feet and stood beside Ritchie, and together they watched the band, heads reared, ewes stamping nervously, as the wind brought down the tang of grizzly and the scent of their dead kindred.

Ritchie shrugged. "I'll help you get your man into camp, Carey, then I must ride," he said.

Carey caught his arm.

"You know the high country better

than most, Ritchie. If you're not too busy, how would you like to hire on? I'll pay you two hundred dollars to hunt and kill Old Silver—cash on the line. How's about it?"

Two hundred dollars was a lot of money. It represented four trapped and saddle-broke wild horses.

Ritchie chewed his lower lip a while, then gave a characteristic shrug.

"I'm sorry for your losses, Carey," he said, "but I never was one to kill wild critters out of spite. They fang a hoss of mine, I hunt them and kill them—cougars, mostly. Old Silver has never killed a single head of my stock. I've glimpsed him now and then, well within rifle range, but we've gone our own ways. Now let's get Pete aboard my bronc. He needs to be put to bed. I'll ride herd on him until you can fetch a sawbones in—or maybe you figure to run him into town, if you have a buckboard."

From then until Pete Mallory was safely laid in his bunk at the Carey cabin, Dave Ritchie made no further comment. Ordinarily, he was a man of few words; he talked more to his part wolf companion Yan than to men.

When Carey elected to take Pete into town, Dave rode back to the hills to bring down his pack pony. He would have to remain on watch at the sheepman's camp overnight. As he rode past the grazing woolies, he curled his lip and wrinkled his nose, for their smell was pungent on the bright morning air.

Two days later Tom Carey returned alone. He had been unable to find a replacement herder and until Pete Mallory was ready for work again, he would have to go it alone.

In the evening he and Ritchie sat chatting on the small stoop of the cabin.

"You're a cowman originally, Ritchie," Carey said slowly. "You hate sheep. I can tell it by the wrinkle and quiver of your nose whenever you come near my band."

"That's right, Carey. I was on my dad's little ranch along the Strip when sheep came in and stomped out all our grass and killed our leased range. Dad never recovered from that and the sheep wars."

A coyote wailed dismally, and Yan, lying near by his owner's feet, pricked his ears forward and back and gaped his strong jaws.

Carey looked down at the big tawny beast and smiled, then turned his attention back to his companion.

"There's big money in good sheep stock these days, Ritchie," he said. "On the back trail home, I got to thinking about you."

Ritchie set his mouth and his steely blue eyes began to glitter.

"So what?" he asked through his firmed lips.

CAREY shrugged. "It's out," he said slowly. "Forget it."

"Go ahead," Dave urged. "I'm broad-minded. I like you, even if I hate your sheep."

"I'd thought of offering you a partnership, Ritchie." Carey smiled when he saw Ritchie's sharp start of reaction. But he went on: "I'm running my band up here in the best range I have ever seen. Winters aren't too tough. I'd figured it would pay me to give you a third share just to be around, to hunt and trap, or kill the cougars, grizzlies, and wolves. But I can tell it don't appeal."

Dave Ritchie got to his feet, and turned to con the wild hills and the mountain range beyond, now all aflame in the last glory of the setting sun. It was a great country, the kind of wild, challenging country he admired over all others. Soon, he realized, he might have to shift range, for he would have trapped out all worthwhile young stock from the wild horse band.

He began to stroke his jaw and chew at his underlip.

The evening was quiet with only the sound of a distant small mountain waterfall breaking the silence.

Dave's throat began to work. He had half turned back toward Carey when from near by there came the plaintive blat of a ewe, and then a chorus of similar

sounds followed by the sudden rush of feet.

Yan sprang from the stoop and bounded into the scrub brush near by.

"Lion!" Dave gasped.

The sheep were now drumming in full stampede toward the camp yard, and Carey lifted a rifle down from an antler rack just under the stoop's roof.

"Don't worry, Carey," Dave said quietly. "Yan'll scare off the lion." Then he laid a hand on Carey's shoulder.

"I'll be shoving off at dawn," he said. "I have an order to fill for half a dozen good young wild slicks. I'll tether my stock out afresh and bed down early. Good luck to you, Carey."

Tom Carey nodded and replaced his rifle in its rack. He went out with Ritchie and strode about his huddled sheep band, then looked off toward the lake. For long moments he wondered if he could hang on.

At dawn, after a hurried breakfast, Dave Ritchie rode out, rounded the lake and began his climb to pick up the wild horse trail again.

Ritchie found the hill stock grouped alertly in a small box canyon.

FROM BEHIND cover he watched the mane and tail of a handsome young stallion pennant in the breeze. The beautiful chestnut stood alone on a rise of land above the main band.

"Otu!" the Indians called this handsomely sculptured creature. "Otu," meaning: *"Here he is!"*

Dave sighed and switched his glance over the band. A young colt rose, to join mock battle with a little sorrel filly. It seemed to ease the tension of the band. Muzzles dropped, and old stock and young resumed their grazing.

Dave backed his mount deeper into the underbrush and began to formulate his plans for capture. He saw that he could take at least five head of suitable saddle stock from the band, not including Otu, the stallion.

A sudden thought made his throat go dry. Why not take Otu for himself? Why not settle down to thoughts of a horse spread here, a spread of his own, where the lush range, adjacent to Lost Lake and the foothills, was excellent?

Shortly he was back at his camp where Yan greeted him with a gape of his powerful jaws.

"I found 'em, Yan boy," Dave said as he dismounted. "Tomorrow, at dawn, I build my trap, and then you can come in to work with me. Sound okay?"

He reached down and rubbed that part-ear, and Yan pressed his strong muzzle hard against his master's leg.

Dave worked on his trap corral for a full day before he was satisfied. It consisted of two separate corrals, the trap proper connected with a lead corridor which he had carefully arranged between standing second-growth cottonwoods.

He led his little pack mare into the cloister of the smaller, inner corral. She was a product of a wild band, a shaggy little dun he had in time gentled, and she still retained some of her wild urges. Many times, with her plaintive whinnying, she had been a successful decoy.

Dave was glad he had Yan at hand, for Yan's presence kept lions away from the horse band.

Then began the careful work of round-up, when Yan played a sharper role. Craftily, wolflike, he circled the band, forcing them to remain close to their small, boxed draw.

In the nights, the wild buglings of Otu sent Yan out, and Dave Ritchie smiled.

As he rode stealthily about the lower levels of the foothills, trying always to keep the horse band in view, Dave thought a great deal about Tom Carey. He had an instinctive sympathy for Carey because of his losses, but he did not want to see more sheep brought into this country. More would be sure to come—and maybe even less desirable than Carey—if the range were cleared of natural dangers. That was the chief reason why he had turned down Carey's surprising offer of a partnership. He couldn't do anything to encourage the woolies. Now with this idea of starting his own spread here,

he had an even stronger reason for wanting to keep the sheep out.

IN THE quiet hush of early dawn, the following morning, Dave was still thinking of these things when all at once big Yan stirred.

The entire wilderness zone hung in a tremulous silence. Not yet had the earliest tanager begun his melliflous song.

Dave could feel his pulses throbbing in tempo with that unaccountable throb of hinterland quiet when suddenly Yan gave out a strange throat sound and sprang forward. Before Dave could purse his lips to whistle the big fellow back, Yan had vanished.

"Lion, mebbe," Dave thought. But it was a little late for lion. They were nocturnal marauders.

Then came the muffled drum of hoofs. Otu's wild band was in full flight. The pound of their hoofs became sharper, punctured now and then by a shrill whinny.

Ritchie was tightening a cinch when out of the lower country came a dismal wail. It was the cry of Yan, a mournful wail like that of a dog wolf sounding a death knell.

In the saddle, the horse hunter sent his bronc swiftly down an old elk trail. He swung as they reached a plateau level to glimpse the handsome form of Otu, the wild stallion.

Otu stood with head up facing the east. His band had gone flying on through a narrow gorge.

Ritchie took a moment or so to appraise again the beautiful conformation of the wild chieftain as he stood tensed with eyes wildly staring and fluted nostrils working sharply.

Again Yan sounded, and the animal's sharp cry of pain caused Ritchie to stiffen in the saddle. For a long moment he sat staring, as if frozen, then suddenly he dug a heel into his horse's flank and sent him down toward the hemmed-in box canyon.

Broken rails at the inner corral told their grim tale.

"Old Silver!" Dave gasped and jerked his carbine from the scabbard. Then he glimpsed Yan. The big hybrid was limping, shaking his head as he staggered in a circle about the corral.

Old Silver had struck early and ruthlessly. Dave turned again to Yan. The big fellow was now squatted on his rump, licking his wounds.

Brush crackled, and Dave spun to see the huge, hoary-furred form of the big silvertip moving through a patch of scrub brush, climbing heavily.

Sentiment was forgotten as Ritchie jerked the lever of his Winchester and snugged the stock against his cheek. He swore softly when the big form vanished. Patiently the man waited, and when brush stirred, his trigger finger gently squeezed.

Almost simultaneous with the crack of the carbine there came a terrific roar from the old heller of the craglands.

Quickly Dave jerked the empty shell from the breech and recharged it. His horse quivered and shied, for the tang of Old Silver's scent, mingled with the death tang, was frightening, terrifying.

"Sure I hit him," Dave breathed when there was no further movement up above. He was wise to the ways of the big silvertips. They were dangerous enemies when wounded, wise and foxlike in their cunning.

Came a sudden crash of brush, and the man threw up his Winchester; but Old Silver was going away. There was no opportunity for another shot. With lips set firmly, the horse hunter wheeled his frightened mount and rode down to the floor of the small canyon. Yan needed aid urgently. There was no need to glance to the corral with any degree of hope.

UP AT THE camp, big Yan was stretched before a fire, blinking balefully, gasping or wincing as first aid astringent bit sharply.

"You'll make it, big boy," Dave said softly. "Pretty soon, I'm taking you down to Tom Carey. He'll look after you while I—" Dave's voice died away. He shuddered, for the tracking down of a wounded

grizzly in the rugged craglands was not a task to contemplate with any degree of comfort.

Two days later, with Yan across his saddle, Dave rode into Tom Carey's home sheep yard.

The good looking young sheepman smiled mirthlessly as he listened to Ritchie's tale.

"Now what, Ritchie?" he asked softly.

Dave shrugged and lifted Yan down.

"I'd like you to watch out for Yan a spell, Carey, while I—while I—" He turned and stared fiercely toward the heights.

"It must have been bad, Ritchie. You don't like killing the big wild critters," Carey observed.

"Yes. It was bad. I told you that when a wild critter, bear or lion, struck down one of my horses, I paid off. I've got to get Old Silver, Carey. I've already wounded him. How badly, I can't say. What calibre's your rifle?"

Carey smiled and shook his head. "An old one, Ritchie—.45-.90, octagon barrel Winchester. Heavy as hell's anvil, but it has power."

Dave nodded. "I'll borrow it," he said. "Leave you my carbine."

He carried Yan into Carey's shack and laid him gently on the floor by the stove.

Carey watched him closely, then went to get the old rifle down from its antler rack. He brought a box of ammunition.

"You'd best take enough grub to last a spell, Ritchie," he recommended. "That old grizzly heller's cute. Wounded, he'll be tough for you. Watch your step, huh?"

Dave's thin lips parted in a faint smile as he nodded.

"Thanks, Carey. I'll be careful. Now, if I can borrow some sidemeat and beans. I'll get riding. May be gone three, four days—or longer."

They shook hands as they parted and as he watched the horse hunter ride on, to skirt the shimmering lake, Tom Carey shook his head. Old Silver had taken a heavy toll. He had stampeded the wild band of Otu, and perhaps had sent them off through the pass to an altogether new range, and with their going went Ritchie's means of livelihood.

DAVE RITCHIE was thinking the same thing as he rode out on Old Silver's trail. The big silvertip was a real menace, and the horse hunter was angry and disgusted with himself for not having seen it before. If he hadn't had such a strong feeling about sheep, he would have helped Carey the first time the sheep band was attacked. He felt guilty, ashamed of his selfishness. It couldn't be called anything else. He hoped it wasn't too late to—

His horse faltered on the narrow shelf rock trail, and Dave came back to the matter at hand with a start. He dismounted and edged up to the sturdy little bronc's head.

"You're sure spooked a heap, Mac," Dave said softly as he rubbed the dun-colored muzzle. "Can't say I blame you. Old Silver's trail is getting fresher right along."

Dave led on around an overhanging shelf of rimrock, treading it with great care lest he dislodge some of the loose slatelike rock.

Here and there along the way, the horse hunter halted to examine dirty brown stains on the rocks and on each occasion a grim smile tucked up his mouth corners.

The crippled killer had swung around a shale slide to reach a brush-studded coulee below. For long moments Dave Ritchie studied the situation closely.

"If he's going to bay, he'll make his stand in just such a place," he told himself as he conned the many coverts in the coulee below.

He decided to ground hitch his mount and move in afoot. It would be dangerous, indeed, to enter that coulee if he had to think of the horse's safety as well as his own.

"Hang and rattle a spell, Mac," he said. "You'll be safe enough here where I can see you, should that old heller back track and fetch in behind."

He crumpled one of the horse's ears, then moved out onto the shale slide, care-

fully letting himself down so as to disturb a minimum of rock.

Down at the coulee level he paused to search for sign, but apparently Old Silver had gone into the brush without cracking a twig.

Dave checked the load in his rifle and stepped forward, keeping his thumb close to the hammer, ready to pull it back as he thrust the butt to his shoulder.

The light was failing. In fact, save through occasional openings in the tall growth on the high banks, little daylight penetrated.

Dave made sure that he could see his horse on the upper rimrock. The scrub growth was becoming denser, however, and soon he would have to give all his attention to a search for Old Silver's sign.

Now, in a splash of daylight, he found a crushed huckleberry scrub. Its leaves had been brushed by the wounded silvertip's blood.

Ritchie stooped to search for tracks in the sand beyond. He was still crouched when, without any warning, Old Silver lunged from a denser covert off to the right.

Dave instinctively leaped to one side as the craglands giant rushed. He heard the clack of those snapping jaws, tusk on tusk.

He almost stumbled when a boot heel caught in loose rock and he started backward as Old Silver's first bellowed battle challenge sounded.

The big silvertip whirled on his hind legs and half rose to hurl his nine hundred pounds into action.

Dave fumbled with the hammer of the rifle. His fingers seemed numbed, frozen, but at last he jammed the heavy butt against his shoulder and squeezed the trigger.

Old Silver was coming in charging. He continued his charge even as he spilled forward and down.

The man attempted to whip to one side as he jerked the lever of the rifle, but a

STRANGE INDIAN RITES

Did you know that once an Indian boy was able to walk, he was bathed out of doors daily, even in the bitterest winter weather? After which the toddler was supposed to make his way home on his own two feet—while still stark naked.

But the Indian boy did have it softer than his modern counterpart in one respect. It was definitely forbidden ever to spank him, because even if he were spanked only once his spirit was supposed to transform itself immediately into that of a squaw—a state synonymous with that of a coward or weakling.

Actually, Indian women displayed tremendous courage and strength every day of their lives. One of the lesser-known ways in which this was done took place when a brave had died. As part of the funeral rites, all the female relatives would cut themselves deeply with sharp knives.

When a very important chief died, like the celebrated Kicking Bird, he was buried in the finest and largest of coffins. Kicking Bird's was eight feet long and four feet deep. Buried along with him was everything he possessed, including his money. This custom, obviously practised to demonstrate the respect the tribe had for the remains, often backfired, however, for the graves were frequently robbed.

The greatest respect ever shown an Indian was accorded, ironically enough, to a woman. And even though she had no political importance, her American memorials include statues, monuments, tablets and shafts, erected in many parts of the West. What's more, a river, a mountain, a waterfall, a song, and even an airplane have been named in her honor.

She was Sacajawea, the young lady who guided Lewis and Clark on their famous trek to the Pacific.

—Manly E. David

stout wild fruit shrub held him. There was no opportunity to throw up his rifle and sight.

FULL OF fighting savagery, the craglands killer came in, half rearing to give himself more power and purchase as his massive left forepaw swept out.

Dave fired, then crashed backward as that terrible forepaw caught him a sidewise blow on the shoulder. Claw tips raked his face as he crashed into the thicket. His senses reeled as he hung momentarily between unconsciousness and consciousness.

Old Silver was roaring, threshing. It was these sounds that revived Ritchie. He pulled himself clear and glanced about him for his rifle. When he reached for it, terrific pain shot through his right shoulder.

Tightening his mouth, he retrieved the .45-.90 and slowly turned. It was with some difficulty that he was able to manipulate the heavy old Winchester. Old Silver, now seated on his big stern, was a blurred shape as he threshed empty air with his forepaws and roared his most terrible battle sounds.

"Boasted I wouldn't go out of my way to kill you, feller," Dave Ritchie said silently. His lips framed the declaration. He was still quivering from shock when he turned his gun's muzzle and squeezed the trigger.

The following day, while Carey administered first aid to the damaged shoulder, Ritchie told his story piece by piece.

"Even when the old heller wounded me, and could easily have killed me—I—well, it wasn't easy to pull that trigger—final, Carey."

Tom Carey smiled and made sure that the tightly strapped shoulder bandage would stay in place.

"Lucky, Ritchie. Just plain, plumb lucky!" he said. "You'd best ride into town tomorrow, just in case you've got a fracture. Hurt much now?"

"Throbs, Carey. But better, much better. Good thing you feed brandy along of castor oil to your ewes at lambing time. You must've fed me a quart of liquor last night, huh?"

Carey chuckled.

"Half a pint, mebbe, Ritchie. But, what now? Reckon your mustangs have high-tailed it for keeps, huh?"

Dave sat up and cast a long glance down at big Yan, and Yan thumped his tail on the hard packed clay floor.

"Likes it here, Carey," Dave said softly. "Likes you a heap. Well, I've been doing some figuring. I — I still hate woolies, but perhaps it would be best if you got some protection for them. With Old Silver out of the way, the lions will get bolder. I—I like this country, Carey. I'd admire to build a shack up on the rise just north of the lake and—"

"You mean you're accepting my offer of a partnership, Ritchie—actual?" Carey's voice was not his own, in his excitement.

A slow smile widened Ritchie's mouth, and his eyes twinkled.

"I never said any such thing, Carey. But I reckon we could get along as neighbors. I could trap, come winter, and fish some. Yeah, I'll stick around a spell anyhow, so long as those stinking woolies don't keep me awake nights."

Dave got to his feet and strode out and looked off to the north where the lavenders and purples of encroaching twilight were making their final show.

Not a single sheep blatted, and the gentle evening wind gossiped in whispers in the tops of the near-by trees.

Dave chewed at his lip. This was it! Sheep or no sheep, he was staying. Perhaps Otu and his band would return in time.

A coyote pierced the sifting ashes of dusk with a long preliminary wail and then gave out its series of wild staccato yaps and shrill yodeling.

Dave chuckled softly and lifted his glance again to the rugged deeps of the craglands.

Shrugging, he rejoined Carey, and the sheepman's grin widened. He stooped and gently rubbed up Yan's half ear, and his lips moved as if to express thanks to Old Silver.

Meet the Brahmalo—

THE COW WITH THE FUR COAT

A Special Feature by JACKSON COLE

IF YOU hear somebody mention "that old cow with the fur coat," don't jump to conclusions. He might mean exactly what he says.

A rancher has crossed a buffalo and a cow and has come up with a critter which he calls a *brahmalo*. It wears a cow's hair in summer, but in winter it grows a coat of buffalo fur.

Ranchers have tried to cross buffalo with Hereford cattle, but the offspring, called *cattalo,* were so large that, at calving time, four of the mothers out of five died, and the project was abandoned.

Pete Rosander, a South Dakota rancher, figured that brahma cows, being much larger and more rugged than Herefords, might have a chance to survive the experiment. But when he ran buffalo bulls in with his herd of brahmas, there seemed to be some kind of class distinction in effect. The animals would have nothing to do with each other.

Rosander then tried another tack. He took infant buffalo bulls out of his buffalo herd, raised them on brahma cows, and let them run with the brahmas until they were grown. The young buffaloes, apparently assuming that they, too, were brahmas, mated with the brahma cows, and the brahmalo came into existence.

The brahmalo has a body shaped like that of a brahma and a head like a buffalo's. Being a cross between two large animals, it will grow as much beef in two years as a Hereford will make in four.

It can stand the heat and the cold, for it grows a coat of fur in winter, and sheds it in summer. In winters when range cattle are frozen stiff on the northern ranges, the brahmaloes, wrapped in their buffalo robe, don't stand around and freeze and lose weight; they get out and play in the snow and like it. They don't need too much to eat in relation to rate of growth, and they can put on weight on range where the average cow would be reduced to a skeleton.

Rosander wasn't just horsing around when he went to work to create the brahmalo; he was trying to produce a beef animal that could live on less than other animals and also could stand the northern cold better without losing weight. This animal does the trick. People who laughed at Rosander when he began his experiments are now trying to buy his stock, and the Department of Agriculture is learning about beef from him.

But you won't be sitting down to any Buffalo-Bill-Cody meal of half-and-half buffalo meat for a while yet. There are at present only sixteen of the little critters.

Lonnie was rough, tough, and sixteen, and he wanted to be treated like a man and have a man's rights—including the right to a woman!

The fierce excitement of battle was in Lonnie

WAR KNIFE

a novelet by thomas calvert

CHAPTER I

Too Young

HE JOINED the wagon train at Laramie, a dirt-poor, gaunted, back country boy in buckskins whose wild animal shyness and lean looks made him look younger than his years. He had quick, level brown eyes that would have made him welcome to the men of that plains and mountain country, but these heavy moving, stolid farmers took him with a mixture of contempt and suspicion.

They had come from towns in Pennsylvania and New Jersey where people set great store on piety and respectability and judged a man's worth by his property. They did not yet understand the wilderness where life was constant vigilance and warfare. Nor did they know how early it hardened and toughened a boy's core into manhood and put a man's value of life upon himself and not upon his barns and cattle.

Without any special interest, they watched the boy ride in, mistaking his poverty for sloth and his shyness for inferiority. Not understanding anything but their own ways and kind, they set their judgment on him. They did not look kindly upon the wildness that was in him and were plainly suspicious of his fine Blackfoot war knife that was entirely out of keeping with his tattered buckskins.

Old Isaac Pendon, leader of the wagon train, asked the lad, "Boy, how did you come by a knife like that?"

The boy was nettled, for no mountain man would carry a knife like that unless he'd come by it honestly.

"It's trophy," he declared, a little truculently. "I fit my way clean over a cliff for it."

"Trophy, eh?" Pendon asked with a derisive, warning tone. "Well, young wildcat, you just be careful you don't collect any trophies out of this wagon train."

The boy's eyes filled with hot resentment. "Doggone!" he yipped, angry and hurt. "What's the matter with you clodhoppers? Don't you ever fight and win, back where you come from?"

Eben Saunders scowled. Here was a chance to make an impression on the man he hoped would be his father-in-law as soon as—Penny—Miss Priscilla Pendon, Isaac's sixteen-year-old daughter, filled out another inch or so. She would have been regarded as too young for marriage back in Pennsylvania, but here in this raw new land a man needed a wife just as he needed a good horse and sons for manpower. A woman was given no right to dispute the edict.

So Eben felt called upon to put this hillbilly whippersnapper in his place. He moved forward.

"Here now, we'll have no sass out of a lying little highpockets!" he declared and reached for the boy's ear.

The ear wasn't there, but Eben felt the tip of the war knife pricking against his jowls. There was a sharp sucking of breath, followed by a taut silence of indecision and muttered disapproval.

Cliff Yeager, who was more of a hunter and horseman than the others, laughed. "Hell, that's his equalizer. He ain't got more than a hundred twenty pounds agin your one ninety, Eb Saunders."

Saunders was mottled and quivering with anger. He managed to wheeze, "He's trying to kill me!"

"Step off from him," Cliff advised. "He can't do you no harm if you ain't atop his knife."

"That's all I hanker for," the boy agreed shrilly. He had recognized his own fault by now, and although he wasn't sorry for it, felt he was misunderstood. "I didn't come in here to make trouble. I just come in to get a trail job."

Saunders backed away, embarrassed at the chuckles, but not witty enough to laugh this off. He took himself very seriously and was ever conscious of his prestige.

"A savage little hillbilly like that ain't safe around the train," he growled at a safe distance.

"Might be safer than some of the danged fool guess work we've had about weather and river crossings and water ahead," Cliff Yeager mocked him. "You're afraid to chance him, Isaac, I'll take him with my outfit for chore boy."

"*Chore* boy?" the kid yipped with fresh affront.

Then his gaze drifted beyond Cliff Yeager to the girl. She was sitting atop the hurricane deck of Isaac Pendon's lead wagon, hoping desperately that the boy wasn't too proud to stick along and with all her feelings written on her face. Priscilla Pendon was both girl and woman, able to take a woman's place in life, but hungry for the things of her own age, and there were no other young folks in this train.

She'd seen the boy lurking around the camp until he got the nerve to ride in. She'd noted the eager, willing way his wiry pinto answered his slightest wish and knew the pony had been gentled with love instead of harshness. Then there was the quick way the boy had defended himself without letting his temper go and doing real damage. She'd caught the quick and ready apology in him, and the determination under it and she thought: Here is a man who will never give trouble unless it's put at him, but who will be ready on that instant. That was a characteristic she could appreciate against the harsh meanness of so many of these farmers.

With the quick sensitivity born of his wilderness upbringing, the boy knew she wanted him to stay and make things right. It was hard for him to do; he didn't have much in the world but that scrub pony and war-knife—and his pride. But she was the gentlest and prettiest thing he'd ever seen or dreamed of.

So he looked back when Cliff Yeager demanded, "Well?" and nodded, and said with choked meekness, "Yes sir, there ain't no chore in this train that I can't do."

Saunders scowled and Isaac Pendon frowned with disapproval, but Yeager chuckled and murmured, "Hard pill to swallow, son? Well, every man has to prove himself. What's your name?"

"Lonnie Tilden," the boy almost whispered.

"All right, Lonnie. My wagon is num-

ber ten. Go back and rustle up some food."

"A bad boy, wild and savage as an Injun," Pendon grunted as the boy trailed off.

Yeager said, "Give him a chance, Isaac. He's from these hills and may stand us good."

"How can you trust a boy who lies?" Saunders asked, disgruntled. "He's too young to have been at fighting. That knife was stolen. It's no trophy."

"Trouble with you, you never done any fishing or deer hunting, Eben," Yeager allowed, "or you'd understand a man can stretch a yarn an inch or two without being a downright liar. However he got it, you'll have to admit, he knows how to use that knife."

Priscilla was sixteen—and ready for a man

Eben Saunders turned purple and went off, muttering.

The boy led his pony past Pendon's wagon, darting a swift, furtive look at the girl. She wasn't looking at him at all. She was looking at the sky. But her face was flushed and she was smiling the way a woman does when she's so happy she could cry.

The boy turned crimson under his deep copper burn and even with the anticipation and excitement of youth felt a gloomy reaction. "Her pa will never let me near her," he thought miserably. "These farmer folk put big store on property, and what have I got?"

He met her that night, in a way of speaking, when the camp held a hymn sing. They stood on opposite sides of the big roaring fire and never missed a thing the other did. Lonnie stood there, half dreaming, thinking: When they made her, they took golden sunshine and autumn leaves and made her body, they took the song of the brooks and waterfalls for her voice and they used star glow for her eyes.

It was something he could think without embarrassment. All the dreams and feelings and poetry of the wild spaces was in him as he stood there, sensing the girl and wanting her more than anything he'd ever wanted in his life. And because of it, Lonnie was all the more keenly aware of his poorness.

Penny caught all that in the way of the young; she knew what was in his heart and thoughts more thoroughly than if he'd tried to tell her. And they were friends, maybe even lovers, before a word was ever spoken.

The wagon train rolled out of Laramie and crawled toward the great snow-capped peaks beyond, and the Indians put up their signal smokes from high points along the trail every dawn and sundown.

The boy and girl began to talk a little to each other. Just shy, awkward comments that would have told little to older folk, but between them, told a lot. Once she asked, "You've lived out there in Injun country all your life?"

"This is all Injun country, Miss Penny," he told her seriously. "Right now, they know just how much water we take at every stop. They're squatting like jack rabbits, watching from every bush."

"Eben Saunders says there's no worry for a train this size."

He speculated on that. He looked off at the signal smokes hanging like gossamer against the painted evening sky. "Maybe yes, maybe no," he said. "They're stringing this train out too far on account of dust, and they're grazing the herds out too far at night."

"Why don't you tell my pa?" she blurted.

A shamed, angry look crept into his clear brown eyes. "I done that, but they figured I was too young to know, or else

that I was just making big talk."

"They're so stubborn and set in their ways," she sympathized.

He nodded glumly. "Ain't no job they figure me too young to do," he told her. "But come to something I might tell 'em and they treat me like a kid."

A little later along the trail she asked, "How come you're all alone in the world so young, Lonnie?"

"There were fourteen of us and I was oldest, but there wasn't enough work on the place to feed an extra mouth. If I could have been some use, I would have stayed. I was no use." His voice held neither bravado nor a bid for sympathy.

"Didn't your ma feel terrible when you rode away?"

"I dunno," he admitted. "I just left sign of what I'd done and snuck off one night. With all their troubles, mebbe they don't even know I'm gone yet."

"Aw, Lonnie!" she murmured, and there was an ache behind her voice.

"I'm going to send whatever wages I get back," he told her.

"You'll need some for yourself. Something to get started," she suggested.

"No, I can do what I have to for myself," he said. "I've got it figured out pretty well. I'll locate me a sweet little pocket valley down in the 'dobe country and put out some trap lines, and come summer I'll catch and gentle a string of wild ponies."

"Won't it be awful lonesome?" she murmured.

"I never figured so till I met you." Then, startled by his thoughtless words, he looked at her. He saw the soft shine of her eyes and crimsoned, but misery was stronger than shyness. "Your pa would never listen to the way I felt. He'd say I was too young. A useless kid!" he cried in a ragged voice.

She took his hand impulsively. Sympathy and faith came from her, filling him with a heady warmth. "They don't think you're too young to send out hunting when they can't catch game, Lonnie!"

"No they don't," he agreed bitterly. "But they think I'm too young for anything serious. Like homesteading."

She said, "I don't think so. I think you'd do as good as any."

Hot with color, she looked straight into his eyes and let him see how she felt. Then she up and kissed his smooth, beardless cheek and, with woman's wisdom, left him with the knowledge of her trust and willingness if he could find a solution.

CHAPTER II

Utes!

WHEN he had got things clear in his mind, he went to Cliff Yeager. "Mr. Yeager, I got to have me a voice in council," he said determinedly. "There's things I could tell this train. We're heading into trouble."

Yeager eyed him with tolerant amusement. "How come, *Kneehigh?*"

"Those have been Ute signal smokes four days past," the boy said earnestly. "And they ain't just passing word along we're coming. They're making a gather and they're on to the fact there ain't no real scouts with this train. First chance they get, they're going to ambush us."

Yeager leaned back against a wagon wheel. "Well now, suppose they believed you," he inquired, with a grin. "We couldn't get scouts even if we wanted right now!"

"Shucks, I could be scout!" the boy declared.

Yeager chuckled but with sympathy. "Lonnie," he said, "you've forgot something I told you. A boy has to prove himself a man and he can't just pick his time and way of doing it. He's got to wait the opportunity."

"But doggone, it's like to be too late!" the boy protested.

"It's never too late," Yeager said. "Maybe just waiting and holding yourself in is part of the test, fella."

Lonnie cut the air with his thin but strong hand. "This is different, Mr. Yeager! It isn't just for me I'm talking!"

Yeager's keen eyes flicked to the front of the train as he thought of sign he'd

noted. Maybe his memories went back to an earlier time, for his humor definitely sobered and softened. He murmured, "Ah!" with understanding and then asked, "Aren't you a mite young for such thoughts?"

"You're bad as the rest," the boy challenged. "What do you do back East, wait till you're twenty to grow up? I'm seventeen and I'm man enough to hunt and herd for this outfit and man enough to stand night guard. That means you figure I'm man enough to fight if need be. If I ain't too young to fight, why ain't I old enough to have some say about it?"

It was a lot for Lonnie to say but he couldn't prevent its tumbling out. He moved his moccasined feet awkwardly and fingered his war knife with embarrassment.

"I didn't mean to light into you," he apologized, "but you can see what I mean, Mr. Yeager."

"Yes." Yeager nodded seriously. "But if some other folks see it, you're like to have your nose put mighty out of place, snipper," he advised. "Isaac Pendon is a good but very sober-minded man. He is the kind of a man who rates another man's worth by the number of his cattle and acres."

The boy scuffed at the dirt. "I reckon Eb Saunders has got a heap of money?"

"He's earned it," Yeager said with fairness. "He's a good farmer and a hard worker."

"He ain't the man I be!" the boy retorted, glowering. "Give me a trail to run, meat to catch, an Injun to stand off, and I'll prove it! Besides, look at how old he is."

Lonnie didn't mention the girl, but Yeager knew what he was thinking. The boy had hit the trail without much purpose but now he'd seen his dream and there was a hot fear in him that he might not get his chance to reach it.

Yeager gave the boy's shoulder a friendly shake. "Keep a stiff lip. Maybe you'll get your chance to prove up."

The boy nodded toward the fading wisps of the signal smokes. "I'll get the chance all right, but this train's going to be mighty sorry it didn't listen to me sooner!"

He rode last swing on herd that night, a lonely creature lost in youth's miseries and woes, communing with his own black mood. "Too young to have a say in council," he was griping. "Too young to ask for a woman for a wife! Doggone—"

He broke off to listen to a rabbit drumming its hind legs on hardpan. But the point was, rabbits didn't thump on hardpan; they thumped on sod.

The hair seemed to rise on his scalp, and a cold tingle ran along his spine. Violence suddenly surged through him. "Doggone," he said to himself, "I ain't too young to die!"

He cut sign on a small cavvy of ponies standing away from the main herd. Their bulks were solid blocks of shadow against the lesser darkness of this pre-dawn hour. They were standing motionless, heads raised and pointed in the same direction, ears pricked forward.

He loosened his war knife in his belt, drifted his mount carelessly behind the others. Suddenly he jumped his pony into motion. His quirt rose and fell on the startled cavvy while his shrill voice cut the night with a wild, ear-splitting whoop.

The animals jumped into full gallop. There was a startled, guttural grunt somewhere ahead, and a figure bounded off the earth and landed astride a pony behind a bush. Short guttural calls were exchanged back and forth across a hillside. Lonnie heard other ponies moving. Cold sweat burst out on his brow.

But he drove the ponies in a solid mass, drove them hard in on the wheeling shadow of the other rider. He heard a savage howl of anger and frenzy. The other rider's horse staggered under the impact of the driven ponies and went down. The Indian scrabbled out of the way, lashing upward with a knife as Lonnie swept by.

The fierce excitement of battle was in the boy. He had the advantage and wanted a chance to use his war knife and, if he was lucky, to count coup. But other ponies were racing down the hill now,

and there was a hue and cry in the wagon camp. Then some fool with a buffalo gun began to shoot blind.

The boy overhauled his free string and turned them. He drove them full tilt through the now roused grazing bed. It started a commotion but no stampede. Most of the cattle simply went lickety split through the gate Yeager had thrown open to kick and crowd the devil out of the inner circle of the forted wagons.

Hoarse-voiced men were still yelling questions. The man with the buffalo gun continued to thunder at the landscape. Out in the dark a horse whinnied its pain, and there was the deep moan of a dying cow. Someone who didn't know any better threw an enormous armful of wood on the night fire. It flamed up, making perfect targets of all and sundry if the Indians had been coming through.

The boy finished his herd work and followed the last critter into the wagon corral. Seeing Yeager first, he called out to him, a decent subdued pride sounding through the excitement that was still in him. Yeager's deep-chested voice boomed through the wagon camp for Pendon, and when the gray-bearded leader arrived, Eben Saunders was with him, importantly toting the buffalo gun. The boy said briefly he'd broken up a raid, and Saunders went wild, bellowing fresh orders that surer than hell the Indians would gather now and swoop in on them and for every man to get to his battle station.

The boy said, "If they were going to attack, they wouldn't have been trying a little raid. There ain't more than six or eight of them."

Saunders looked glum, and Pendon asked why the boy hadn't called in a warning and for help. The boy looked at him with disbelief that turned slowly to a realization that he was being censured for what he'd done.

Yeager said in his defense, "If he'd have called, they'd have raced in for a fast raid before help could get out to him."

"Ain't that better than losing our scalps so he can play hero?" Saunders snapped. Tempers were snappy and nerves sparking, even though relief was setting in.

There was the usual pointless talk, and they were still at it when dawn broke like a flare across the rolling soot line of the horizon. The boy's first pride and excitement had turned to anger and resistance. He knew he'd done right and had risked his neck to do it, but egged on by Saunders, Pendon had been heavy with criticism.

A group of armed men rode out and came back to report a dead plow horse and milch cow. Those, of course, had been killed by Saunders' blind shooting, and Saunders turned angry and scathing of the boy in defense of his own actions. They made tally on the stock and found none missing.

Then somebody insisted that if the Indians were that close, they'd have sure cut out a few head and run them off or stampeded them. Somebody else remembered they hadn't seen the Indians, that actually, nobody had heard anything but the kid's own wild whoop and the thunder of the quasi stampede. There was a thoughtful, suspicious silence, and Pendon turned hostile eyes on the boy.

Yeager headed off the accusations that were breeding. He said bluntly, "It's easy enough to ride out on that hill and cut sign."

But the top of the rise was covered with thick brush, and nobody hankered to go out there in case Indians were in hiding. They were cautious enough for that, but they still didn't believe the kid's story. They thought he'd built up a little romance out there just for the hell of it. They would not give him credit for a wit and courage they did not themselves possess, and now there was a growing disbelief in everything he'd said. When they came to think of it, the case was pretty clear. What boy would take a chance like that instead of riding like hell for safety and for help?

Lonnie's lean jaws set. His eyes felt seared by the fury bottled up inside him, and his mouth was a thin line. He just sat

there glum and sullen and hot-eyed, refusing to argue in his own defense, and snapping back resentful answers in an anger-choked voice. The Indian who'd gone down in the horse melee had got away, so unless someone rode out to cut for sign there was no kind of proof of Lonnie's story, and his pride was too raw now to demand investigation. Finally he rode away sore and resentful.

In spite of putting it all on the boy, fear hung over the wagon train like a cold shadow. Old feuds and scores flared up, there was argument and accusation over the smallest matters. Pendon's authority was futile in the face of this hysteria. Eb Saunders added to the disorder with his stupid self-importance. Yeager, whose cool-headedness might have helped, had clammed up in disgust. While the men were arguing in circles, the thirsty cattle inside the wagon corral began to mill and raise a thick, choking dust.

Carrying a heavy bucket, Penny came out of the dust cloud with a furtive boldness. She arrived at Yeager's wagon just as Lonnie's mood had reached the blackest depths to which it could fall. He had just swung astride his pony, his eyes so wet he could barely see and his throat so full he felt choked.

One look at him told Penny the whole story. She called, *"Lonnie!"* and looked at him in startled disillusionment. "You're figuring to ride off," she said miserably.

He gave a bitter shrug and looked the other way. "What else is there to do? There ain't a living soul in this whole train gives me credit for what I did last night."

"I do," she told him gently. "I know you told the truth."

He looked at her then, but was still defiant, glowering. "You're just saying that," he rasped. "How would you know what happened?"

"Because I was sitting on our tailgate, looking out at where you were riding," she said earnestly. "I couldn't see, of course; nothing but a shadow moving. But I could hear and I heard you start up them ponies, and I heard the Indian pony grunt and fall in the collision."

He peered at her hard and through the tears in his eyes she made him think of a rainbow behind the mist on a mountainside. He gulped and asked in the voice of youth's eternal hopes, "Miss Pen—Penny—what were you doing up at that dark, cold hour?"

She turned self-conscious and dropped her eyes. "Well," she countered, "you were up, too, riding out there in that dangerous darkness." Then she gave him the cool, commanding look women have used on men down the ages. "And you've had no vittles since supper last evening, and I know it. Lonnie, you get down this minute and have you some breakfast."

From her bucket she brought out the big breakfast she had smuggled down the wagon line. He sat motionless on his pony, torn between two feelings: bitterness at the whole wagon train and the deep wonder and appreciation of the fact that Penny had sat up half the night worrying and thinking of him.

She said, "Well?" and there wasn't much else to do but swing down and let her give him breakfast. By the time he finished, Penny had changed his mood of simmering self-pity to one of boiling anger. She got him so mad he swore he'd stay just to show they couldn't drive him out with their suspicions and criticisms. By goshamighty, he'd stay just to see if any man had the gumption to call him a liar outright, and heaven help the man who did it!

He never mentioned staying for her, but she smiled when he gave his hot-tempered decision. Not the smile of a young girl at all, but the smile of Eve, the ever-knowing.

CHAPTER III

Indian Strategy

FROM then on the stock grazed under heavy guard, but there were no fur-

ther incidents. But the signal smokes went up each dawn and sundown, keeping nerves tensed and tempers raw. Pendon regained some authority simply because of the general bickering. Survival was the main consideration now. Women whose husbands or kin had died along the way were almost forced under the protection of other men. There was talk that Pendon might marry his daughter off to Saunders without further waiting.

Lonnie went from black despair to mounting anger. He wanted to run away. He wanted to steal the girl. He wanted to build a fight and kill Saunders. He wanted to save the train from its own stupidity and disintegration, and thereby be declared a man, entitled, like any other man, to ask the hand of a woman.

More than anything he wanted that—to be able to ask for Penny as a man should. But he had to earn his right to do that. In his blackest moments, that fact rang through him. He had to prove that their judgment of him as a wild kid, ungoverned and savage as the wilderness, was wrong.

He thought his chance had come when they reached the point where the Old Astorian route branched off from the main trail. Lonnie sat on the outside of the council circle and listened with amazement to Eben Saunders argue for going up the Astorian as a ruse to mislead the Indians. More astonishing, the bulk of the men agreed with him.

The kid listened until he couldn't hold still any longer and then yipped, "Mr. Pendon, don't you folks know the Injuns can travel that country better than this train can?"

Pendon frowned at him over the heads of the crowd, but Yeager called out with fair interest, "How do you mean that? You ever ride that trail?"

"I sure have!" the boy vouched. "I've rid it six times with my old man. That's nothing but a pack trail, no better than for small wagons. You'll break your axles, you'll run into hills you have to windlass up. For a heavy train like this, that trail is full of ambush."

There were mutterings of interest. There was argument favoring the boy's statement. Men turned and asked him questions decently for the first time since he'd been among them. He could taste the strong, solid flavor of a man's importance. From way back where the women were gathered, he knew the girl's eyes were shining on him.

But then the excitement of seeming to be accepted proved too heady. "Why I know that Astorian trail like I know my hand!" the boy boasted. "That's where I fought my first Injun and won my knife!"

Pendon growled, "*First one,* eh?" and gave a grunt of mirthless derision. Saunders guffawed, and men who had been ready to listen to the boy suddenly looked at him with scorn. Even Yeager's expression changed. He blew against his lips and muttered, "That was too bad." Opinion swung solidly against the boy and behind Saunders. After the moment of scorn and contempt, they simply excluded Lonnie from their plans and conversation.

Lonnie sank back out of sight, full of self-pity and fresh miseries again. He felt worse because he couldn't justify himself. He hadn't exactly told a lie, but in his excitement he had overstated his experience. He had won that knife in battle on the Astorian, but he had not killed the Indian and he had never even grappled with an Indian boy since.

He was in a deep blue funk when the girl sneaked away from the crowd and found him. Life just wasn't worth the living.

"I guess I just done messed up any chance I might have had," he admitted in a dismal voice.

She stood on the other side of his pony and let her sympathy spread out to him. She said, "Aw gee, Lonnie, if they just didn't all have it in for you, they'd have let that pass! Isn't a one of 'em who hasn't boasted a little high now and then."

"It's true about the Astorian," he mumbled. "But I won't never make 'em believe me now. I might as well just drop out and turn back."

"Through all those Injun scouts?" she gasped.

"Aw, them!" he muttered. "The one thing I really been doing half my life is sneaking through redskins."

Her hand reached across the pony and gripped his with excitement. "Lonnie, maybe that will be your chance!"

He looked at her with puzzlement. "What—riding out and being whipped back?"

"No," she breathed. "Don't you see what I mean? You might save the train yet!"

He didn't get it. He shook his head.

She was full of enthusiasm now. It was as if she were actually praying for the worst thing that could happen. He'd been thinking all along they were due for ambush. Now suppose on this Old Astorian they got it? He knew danged well there wasn't another man in the train, saving maybe Yeager, who'd stand a chance of getting through for help.

Her excitement was contagious. It put a gleam back into his eye and color in his cheeks. But it filled him with the chill of a winter blizzard, too. He'd lived too close to massacres and Indian torture. He knew the downright horror of them.

More than that, he could anticipate what failure would mean, even if he was called upon, even if he was trusted. A hillbilly boy sneaking through Indian scouts on his own poverty-stricken business was one thing. A messenger going for help to save an ambushed wagon train was something else. They'd pursue him to hell and gone. They'd have every possible trail covered ahead.

In any case, where would he find help in time to be of use? Laramie was a long piece back on an open trail. If the Indians meant to attack, they would be coiled like snakes along that trail. The lay of the country cut off the northern forts. The cavalry had long since stopped guarding the Astorian. Jim Bridger's fort, the center for trappers, traders and freighters, was near. But Jim Bridger had gathered every man in that area for a big sheep drive to Oregon, so there'd be nobody at his fort but a few old men.

There weren't any other white men in that country, except at Jackson Hole, the outlaw camp. He'd never been to the camp, but he knew all about it from his father. And he knew all about Frank Colby, the outlaw chief, the coldest and most ruthless of men. Only gold in some form would lure Frank Colby to risk his neck. Help out a train of damned stubborn, thick-witted farmers? Why, Colby would laugh at that.

All these things rattled through his mind while Penny talked. Part romance, but mighty real for all of that. He guessed he wasn't near the man he'd thought, but he did know the country and he was beyond these strangers in his ability to size up a trail situation. He was pretty sure those constant signal smokes were calling a gathering of Utes to converge on the wagon train at some point ahead. This was a big train, and Utes were brave but cautious, but they seldom had the opportunity at such a big train and one with such damned fools at the head.

Lonnie tried to think how he might be of use, how he could vindicate himself. He could see none. He'd had his chance and messed it up, and now he might as well be gone or dead. But there was the girl, trusting in him implicitly, practically wishing for an ambush just so he could prove himself.

He thought that, if trouble came, he could die at least for her, maybe in her defense. If the train survived, as it probably would with losses, she'd always remember that he hadn't quit or left her in the lurch even if he wasn't old enough to ask for her hand.

He let her talk and romance, and fell in with her thoughts, but inside him, the acid of hard and bitter realism was eating out youth's flighty fancies.

The train rolled on, groaning and screeching up the Old Astorian against all common sense. Wagon trees cracked, hubs split out, axles dried up. They had water troubles because the springs they found were small. The trail ran high and narrow. There was not room for a proper camp or to spread the herds out for graze. Pendon fell ill and because he was afraid he was going down with mountain fever, he listened with greater agreement to Eben Saunder's pressing wish for his daughter's hand.

With Pendon sick, Saunders took over leadership. Where the trail leveled off into a flat valley, he ordered a stop for rest and graze, and the boy saw they were in for trouble. There was a river in this valley, over against the bluffs, but there was also a mesa-like, flat-topped piece of ground, and Saunder's picked the latter place for his camp site. He made a great to-do of winding the outstrung, groaning wagons into a proper fort and impressed even some of the less friendly.

Lonnie watched all this with tight-lipped, sullen amazement. If the Utes wanted to attack, Saunders had done them the service of getting the wagon train marooned. There wasn't a way in the world the train could reach water without crossing ridged and broken ground. The Indians could light behind those ridges and put every wagon ablaze with fire arrows as it passed through. He had wanted to tell Yeager, but Yeager had been brusque with him since the day Lonnie had boasted his way out of his big chance. Yeager had taken a rawhiding himself for having believed in the boy at all.

The men of the wagon train were gaunted with the hardships of the trail, sour with troubles and bad luck and generally rebellious. It was difficult to make them stand night guard. Then an incident took place that made it possible for Saunders to submit to the general dissatisfaction and still save face. The signal smokes vanished from the horizon. There was not a sign of Indian for two full days.

The train relaxed. A heavily armed party rode out and brought in antelope. A feast was planned, and three of the lone women decided to get married. Pendon let it be known that, under the circumstances, he considered his daughter old enough to be betrothed. To Saunders, of course.

The boy's spirits sank even lower than the girl's. He managed to sneak a few somber minutes with her, and all she could choke was, "Gee, Lonnie, if you were only a little older! If you could just make Pa see you've got as much sense and gumption as Eb Saunders!"

Her words made Lonnie even more miserable. Saunders was crowing over the ending of the signal smokes. Vanity had persuaded him that he had actually thrown the Utes off their trail, or shown such generalship, he'd scared them.

There was nothing Lonnie could do to make them believe that when you stopped cutting Injun sign in this country, it was time to watch out. He tried, but he couldn't even convince Yeager.

Just before dawn, two days later, a guard shouted hoarsely and beat the angle iron alarm, and the train came out of heavy slumber to find blazing light spreading all around them and to choke on heavy, drifting smoke.

They were safe from the actual grass fire itself, but it was consuming all the immediate graze around their knoll. The train went berserk with fear of attack. Lonnie could have pointed out that there was no danger of that or the Utes would not have burned off the ground. He could have told them that the Utes just meant to sit back of those ridges and thirst them into confusion and a disorganized break for water that would leave them prey to fast striking bands of horsemen.

But they hadn't been willing to listen to him before, and not even the girl had given him a word of confidence in their last talk.

Now they could fry in their own stupidity for all of him, and he was ready to fry with them out of spite.

CHAPTER IV

One Chance in a Million

THE sun came up furnace hot, and an acrid, choking stench wafted from the flats all day. Never a sign of a Ute did they catch. It was worse than seeing them. Ragged nerves began to crack. Some men wanted to turn the wagons and make a bolt over the back trail, figuring to run close and solid. They'd have broken up within five miles. Others wanted to press ahead, an impossibility without water—they hadn't filled their barrels. Saunders called for volunteers to ride for help, but didn't know where he meant to send them.

Yeager said reluctantly, "It is no good backtrail. I'll make a try for Bridger's fort."

That drew the boy out of his bitter funk. Only Yeager had been decent to him. He blurted out that Bridger wasn't there, that there was no help but at Jackson Hole where outlaws were camped.

Mention of outlaws scared the pious more than the Indians had. Anyway, outlaws wouldn't help, except for more money than the train could offer. There was fresh argument. Yeager's offer was still the only one, but in the confusion of varying opinion it went unheeded.

As for the boy, Saunders had shut him up with the harsh words, "You couldn't believe a word that half savage little liar says if his life depended on it." That shut Lonnie up for good.

Dusk ran down out of the mountains in a purple tide and the high country night turned chill, but now from senseless risk the train turned to senseless caution. They would not even build cook fires out of fear of showing themselves for night attack. They didn't even know that much, the boy thought scornfully, that the Utes would not attack at night, except for a safe raid on cattle.

The boy hunkered down by Yeager's wagon with his pony tethered to the wheel. He knew just where most of the Utes would be. They'd be blocking any try to get water, and they'd be lying thick along the trail. They'd have a few scouts out, between the flattop and the mountains in the other direction from water. What did they have to worry about with a train like this? The train couldn't last more than three days at most without water. It couldn't get help from Laramie in that time, even if a messenger got through and the Utes would see that he didn't. The Utes knew there was nobody much ahead at Bridger's. They'd just sit tight, and when the train began to break for water, they'd carve it apart piecemeal.

On the far side of the wagons, he could hear the nervous, restless movements of the guards, giving their position away as plain as if they'd toted torches. At the front of the wagon circle, he could hear the raw-voiced, pointless arguments still in process. Saunders wanted to do this. He wanted to do that. He wanted to do whatever nobody else agreed with. When he won his point, he got uncertain and figured he'd better think it over.

The kid snorted with disgust. Arguing, when this night would give them their only slim chance to send for help that might, conceivably, get back in time to save them.

The thought sent a cold chill through him. He didn't care for himself, but there was Penny. Even if she were going to marry Eb Saunders. Way things were running—Lonnie thought of the bloodiness of Ute massacres, and his hair stood on end.

He felt his war knife in his belt and thought of Jackson Hole again. Then the girl's soft footsteps were coming through the dark shadows toward him. She called out softly. She sank down beside him and her breath was soft and urgent on his ear.

"Lonnie, you could do something if you wanted," she pleaded.

He asked sullenly, "What could I do? They won't even give me a chance to talk up!"

"Talk!" she scoffed. "It's all they know to do! Do you need to talk with mudloons to come to your own judgment?"

He hadn't thought of that. It was like moonlight rising over the dark hills of his depression.

"There's one chance in a million," he said earnestly.

"*Your* chance," she breathed with sober faith in him. "*Our* chance, Lonnie!" And she kissed him with all the trust and promise a woman has to give a man; the kiss a woman could never give but to that one man.

Violent young emotion surged in his chest, and then his jaws set hard with youth's determined courage. He said, "I'll make it. Somehow I'll get Frank Colby."

He studied the light. He had three hours before moonrise yet. He studied the dusky roll of the hills and sensed out the unseen movement in the sea of shadows. Here and there, the red glow of fire still showed in the grass. Up on a crest there was a flash of blue-white spark. But no turf or brush gave a spark like that, and anyway, the fire had not run up to the crests.

He grabbed the girl's hand. He said hoarsely, "I've got it! I've got the price for Frank Colby!"

He brushed the soft curve of her cheeks with his lips before he vanished into the heavy wagon shadow. She could see the shadow of the guard, a perfect target for an Indian's cat's eyes in darkness. But she could not see the boy, snaking over the still hot ground.

He moved in spurts and stops, like an Indian scout, in case they had braves posted on this side, but there were no scouts in the charged area. His chief fear was that they might kick up hidden embers from the grass fire. Then the acrid ash dust got into his nose, and the greatest test of manhood he'd ever had to endure was to hold down the sneezes that convulsed him.

On the side of the far slopes, he put his ear flat to the ground and listened. Somewhere near by were ponies, but their sound was that of standing movement. Probably all the scouts over here were camped by twos or threes, and he was sure he could pass them. What interested him most was the sound the ponies made. Some were shod.

That fact vindicated his judgment. The blue-white spark had been made when a shod hoof struck stone, just as he'd thought.

His lungs were aching with the sneezes he was holding back. He found two smooth pebbles under his hand and popped them into his mouth. They didn't end the ache, but they kept the saliva running as he sucked them and made it possible to get out of the danger area and into a gully where he could blow and spit the dust out and sneeze his lungs free.

It seemed to him that the noise he made was loud enough to bring the whole Ute war party down on him. He'd never been so scared in his life, but the feel of the sneeze was good. It struck him that here was a satisfaction a man like Eben Saunders would never have had under similar circumstances. The sound of his own sneeze would have congealed him. The comparison gave the boy a new pride in himself, more self-assurance. The racking fear left him.

He crawled up the gully and lay on the crest, studying the mountains closely. In the way of the frontier breed, he had studied them by daylight, had listened to tales of them. They were not high but they were ragged rock. No pony had ever crossed them and few burros. They constituted a natural barrier to the Jackson Hole country. It was a hundred miles around them.

He considered his chances. Strong men had found themselves marooned up there, too gaunted by thirst or climbing, or maybe wounds, to get down. But a hundred miles extra was too long a run, even if he could make it. He sucked a deep breath into his lungs and listened intently to the night, then smeared the grass char from his hands and clothes upon his face and moved out in a long-paced, silent, woods lope.

He was two people now as he ran—a frightened boy and a determined man. The boy was running from every shadow and feather-topped bush; the man was grimly holding that steady pace, thinking of the girl he wanted for his wife.

Sensing footfalls on his trail as he neared the black shadow of a cleft he bolted forward like an arrow. But the Ute scout was fast and closed in on him. Lonnie could hear the slow, deep breathing of a practised runner and a savage grunt.

His sweat turned cold; it felt like ice. He never thought of his war knife but scrambled madly for a handhold in the cleft of rock. The scout was close behind him.

Lonnie went up like a cat, and suddenly stopped. The rock was smooth and bare above him. He felt frantically to the side and found a projecting root. When he swung his weight onto it, it bent slowly down.

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It held though. The strain on his arms was becoming unbearable. If he could just catch a toe hold—

He kicked, and his feet struck something, solid but yielding. It gave him a chance to get a handhold that was sound. He caught a firm hold and just as the earth went out from under him he swung into a deep split. He braced himself and sucked air into his aching lungs.

Then he heard the dirt he had kicked loose strike the floor below. There was a soft muscular *thwaaack* and a grunt. It came dimly into Lonnie's consciousness that it had not been dirt. It had been the Ute scout.

For some reason, it filled him with a greater fear than before. The thought of how close he'd been to that savage menace surged through him like a torrent. He swung in the cleft and went up like a chipmunk.

At last he sprawled out on top. Not even pausing to get his breath, he rolled and was on his feet and heading like a deer up the main face rock. The sound and the scent of the savage stayed with him. He was halfway up the mountain, and the moon was an orange-red light behind the jagged, soot-black crest before his wind gave out and he stopped.

When he had caught his breath, his good luck struck him. He laughed at himself, and the terror stopped. The terror ended, but not the gaunt, grim outlook of realism. The Ute was dead or badly hurt. There was still the rock, towering black and precipitous above him. Some of the steps looked twenty feet high without a break. Most of the deadfalls did not show at all. The silence of height, of dead, sterile space, of loneliness hung through these hills, and it was eerie. None of the small, friendly night sounds of the valleys and deserts was up here.

Lonnie felt a new, nameless fear, for all that he was wilderness-bred and familiar with the wilds. He had been alone before, had traveled alone, with danger in the shadows. But never had he known the creepy, crazing fear that fell from the dark, lonely silence of these rocks.

He flung himself around with a boy's mounting frenzy. What was that shadow that did not move? What was that thing that did not stalk?

Then his gaze riveted on the moon-bathed white tops of the wagon camp beneath him. He thought of Penny's implicit trust, of the fact that she counted on him. Out of all those stolid, thick-shouldered, heavy-bodied men, when the time came to ask for help, she had come to him against her father's judgment. Even against her betrothal to Eben Saunders.

His jaws set hard. He quieted the animal panic in him. He had a job to do, a duty to perform. More, he had to prove himself a man. He had to prove it not only to her and to himself, but to all of them. It was the only way he could lick Saunders.

He moistened his lips, steadied his breathing. He did the instinctive things men do to pull strength and vitality out of untapped wells. Maybe the sweat of fear had done him good. He felt the long wind in him now. Or maybe it was something else. Maybe manhood was in him like molten iron, simmering off the dross of raw youth and forging it into clean, ringing metal.

He rested and while he waited for the fall of proper light, he picked his trail and figured out his time factors, and rate of run and climb. Before long he'd need water, and that was the one thing he could not figure. These were not bone dry hills, but he cut sign on no brooks. It crossed his mind that, when a man had to travel light, maybe a canteen was more important than a warknife.

He got to his feet and began his climb. It was tricky in those lambent shadows. He hurt himself, but he kept on. The last step below the notch was tall. He felt himself dead-gaunted. In spite of that, he felt an irresistible urge to climb that last step at any cost, to leave the danger and effort and challenge of the world below behind him.

He thought it over. He saw the folly of trying it by night, and bedded down in the high rock's pre-dawn chill. Sometimes running was easier than resting. Like now. Some of the fear of the past trail was still within him. The hair on the nape of his neck bristled, but he forced himself to curl up for whatever sleep and rest there was.

CHAPTER V

The Measure of a Man

SUNLIGHT on his eyes wakened him. He came to with a shame that he might have overslept. But night's shadows still clung to the hollows of the far hillside. He'd lost no time and he was fresh and could see his way.

His body was stiff with exertion, hands and feet tight drawn. He felt half fevered, and yet determination was clear in him. He picked his trail up to the notch and put his legs into a long-striding lope.

He dropped down into Jackson Hole at sundown. He came up short at a raw-voiced command and a shot whistling in front of him. A lookout demanded gruffly to know what he wanted. He answered, *"Frank Colby,"* in a reedy croak.

The lookout came out of the rocks and studied him. He muttered, "Gawdamighty! Boy, you must want him mighty bad," and called out, "O'Connor, give this boy a ride to camp before he croaks!"

Like a sack he fell off O'Connor's cantle at the feet of a tall, arrogant man with a long scar on his face and knew he had reached Frank Colby. He gasped out, "Ute ambush over to Astoria's flat top camp. They can only hold out long as their water."

"Longer than you, kid," Colby grunted and snapped an order for bear grease, rum and water. Tough men rubbed the grease into his torn and blistered flesh with rare gentleness. Men who seldom laughed at anything short of mayhem or death were grinning and chuckling at the boy.

"Now," said Colby, with the sun a bleeding fireball at his back, "I know your Pa and you've got his stubborn innards, Lonnie, but what made you think I'd risk my neck to rescue a herd of mangy, sweating farmers?"

"Those Utes," the boy croaked, "are riding white men's ponies. A heap of 'em are shod."

The outlaw's amused grin slashed out like wire. He looked at his lieutenants with fiery eyes. "That's those eighty ponies we lost from Dead Horse Canyon!" he rasped.

"More," the boy told him. "There's a heap more!"

"There was that wagon train got burned out six weeks back," O'Connor said. "Talk in Laramie was they had some Kentucky blue stock."

"Get ready to ride!" Colby ordered. "Lonnie, we'll leave you here to mend."

The boy could barely sit up. His hands and feet and knees were raw clean to the bone, and he was gaunted bad. But he forced himself to an elbow and he barked out angrily, "Mr. Colby, you can't do that to me!" Then he cooled down and changed his tone. "Mr. Colby, I got a right to ride with you, even if I am a kid."

Something softened in Colby as he cut sign on the boy. Maybe he remembered

when he'd been a kid himself. Maybe he cut sign on the whole story. He thought a moment and then nodded. "All right, if you have to, but you're no kid any more, Lonnie. Slow up or peter out, and we leave you."

Lonnie's eyes were wet with appreciation. He could only nod and swallow.

They did him up in bear grease mitts and boots. They gave him food and rum and an hour's rest, then roped him on a cayuse. They rode out fast and hard through the mountain night, not to succor a wagon train but bent on vengeance. They had stolen those horses themselves, but Colby would not tolerate being robbed by Utes.

They rode hard through half the night and were in the saddle again at dawn. Colby said a good word to the boy, but his expression was impersonal as rock. He said, "Drop out here and make your way back to our camp if you're able."

The boy was dizzy with fever, but he shook his head.

Colby studied him, then shrugged. "Your say, fella, but you're no kid now. You get the same treatment as a grown man."

The outlaw chief swung into leather and led off. They traveled hot trails, and much of the time the boy was out of his head. His body was one big fiery pain, and the sunlight was exploding inside his head, but he stuck. He never whimpered and when they stopped, after sundown, he was able to straighten his fevered thoughts and give Colby the lay of the land he needed.

The outlaw figured things pretty accurately from his knowledge of Utes, and trail-gaunted stock, and the country. He figured the stock might hold on the verge of stampede until dawn and then would light out for water, and that the disgruntled, distraught farmers would not be far behind. The Utes would be waiting on horseback, ready to dart out in bands and pick off single wagons under the cover of the river's morning mists. Even if they'd cut sign of the boy's escape, they'd not be expecting Colby's outlaws and they knew that almost every honest fighting man in the hills was away with Jim Bridger.

Colby cut sign of the Utes' gather. He saw for himself that many rode shod horseflesh. He found tracks that could not have been made by any cayuse, or even a quarterbred. The length of the pace was that of thoroughbreds.

His eyes were hard and sharp and bright as he made his plans carefully, and yet with outlaw boldness. He made early camp and had his men on the move again shortly after midnight. He led them out of the thick, unfurling mists at first dawn, surprising the Indian camp, throwing it into chaos with sticks of dynamite, going through in a blaze of sixgun glory, and gaining his main end, which was to cut loose and stampede the ponies.

Other Indians were riding the hills and hollows, but this was the main camp. They had been outsmarted, robbed of their mounts, and it threw them into angry confusion. The rest was easy. The fight was a run-and-scatter affair, and by full light the Utes were padding into the hills afoot.

Colby rounded up his stock, tallied it with satisfaction, and rode toward the wagon camp with Lonnie. The whole way to the river was strewn with burned and overturned wagons. The morale of the train had broken even earlier than it should have, and the more stubborn farmers had tried to make a rush for water.

Eben Saunders was pompous and truculent, but still scared stiff behind it. Four men carried the sick leader, Pendon, out from his wagon to thank Colby. Penny came out and stood attentively behind him, but with her gaze soft and full of a woman's restrained compassion on Lonnie.

Pendon said with feeble apology and thanks, "Boy, she said you'd make it. She even said you'd manage to bring Colby."

Colby looked at the girl and at the boy, and cut sign shrewdly. Figuring he owed some obligation for what amounted to the return of his stolen horses, plus some valuable extras, he said in his flat, unyielding voice, "Pendon, this ain't no boy any longer. I figured him as much man as any in this train when he come into our camp. I

figure him more man after the ride he made back with us."

Eben Saunders turned purple and opened his mouth to yammer. Colby shot him a contemptuous look and said bluntly, "Shut up. This is the day for him to talk."

Saunders shut up, and Yeager grinned and asked curiously, "Lonnie, how did you get through the scouts?"

"Aw, wasn't nothing much a-tall," Lonnie croaked happily, then remembered his war knife and laid his mittened hand upon it fondly. "Had to count coup on three," he added, waxing warm to his story. "There was one I had to strangle and throw off a cliff with my bare hands. But the worst wasn't the Injuns, it was the doggone walk—"

Yeager looked hard at the knife blade that was fully showing. Dust lay on it in an even film such as could only lay on a finely cleaned and polished surface, and with those hands and in that rush, Lonnie would not have been able to clean off blood.

Yeager's face stiffened an instant, then he laughed. "However you did it, you got through," he chuckled. "And I reckon that cuts the size of a boy's manhood."

"Just wish I'd had me time to cut their scalps for trophy," Lonnie opined. But he wasn't thinking too much of his tall story now that he had the girl in his feverish focus. He was thinking of how gentle she looked and the soft way she'd bathe and care for his damaged feet and hands. Some silent talk was going on betwixt Pendon and Colby, too, for they were watching each other like circling fighters. Only, Colby had a ruthless look on his face, while Pendon had the look of a sick man.

At last Pendon nodded, as if with reluctant decision, and then said for all to hear. "Yessirree, my daughter had you pegged right, Lonnie, and I own up the rest of us were wrong. You proved yourself honest as the daylight and all man."

Colby nodded then and his lips eased at the corners with a brief grin. He looked around at the wagon train's scattered stock with an outlaw's momentary regret.

"Some nice stock there, Pendon."

Pendon eyed him with fresh worry. "You figure we owe you some of that?"

"Naw!" the outlaw grunted, and shook Lonnie's shoulder, man to man. "Anything you owe is owed to this wild hombre. Maybe it will make it faster for him to start up his own ranch."

Sick as he was, Isaac Pendon wasn't too sick to figure that. The wagon train owed Lonnie a neat little herd of stock for saving it, more so with Colby relinquishing what he might have collected without asking. Yessirree, a nice little herd for a son-in-law to start out with. More than Eben Saunders had. The old man found it not too hard now to contemplate this wild hill boy's marrying his daughter.

After all, it didn't matter much how he'd come by that war knife or what he'd really done with it. He'd saved the train and he'd come by maybe twenty-five or thirty head of good brood stock, when Pendon laid down the assessment. It wasn't so much a boy's years or what he claimed or said. The thing that counted was the property he had, and Isaac Pendon wasn't the man to let a good herd get out of his family.

Not that he was going to have to worry much on that score, he thought as he watched his daughter cross to help Lonnie. His main worry now was how long it would take the boy's hands and feet to heal. Heap of man-chores to do now to make up for the damage, even for a young fellow busy as a train lieutenant.

Figuring that way, Isaac could see how this ought to be a mighty short engagement. Man who needed that much nursing needed an honest wife to do it. Settle him down proper, too. Settle him down before he got to living up to that war knife.

"Yessirree," Pendon allowed with weight and just to make things clear, "man that ain't too young to fight or die, he ain't too young to marry."

Penny blushed and Lonnie looked like his fever had really got him. He made himself a silent vow right then. He was going to forget the Injuns he hadn't killed with that war knife.

"Willie," Campwell says husky, "I do not like a voice coming from nowhere!"

The Lost Hair Case

By BEN FRANK

Campwell Columbus and Willie Weddle, the Castor Bean sleuths, blunder their way through a job of headwork!

IT IS A Friday morning shortly after breakfast, with the sky a bright blue and the sun shining hot. My old saddlemate, Campwell Columbus, and I are sitting in the office of the Castor Bean Detective Agency, dozing off and on comfortable.

"Willie," Campwell says, opening one green eye, "leave us go fishing."

I turn my head slightly for a better look at him. He has took off his green hat and is tickling his long, bony nose with the red feather stuck in the hat brim, a pleasant smile lighting his homely mug.

Recalling other times Campwell and I have gone fishing, enjoying the quietness of the cool shaded countryside, I nod agreeable. "Leave us get a move on before

Honey gets the dishes washed and comes to see what we are doing," I say. "I will get the fish poles while you dig the bait."

Campwell pulls a dime from a pocket and squints at it thoughtful. "We will flip, Willie, to see who does the digging. Heads, I don't dig. Tails, you dig, and no argument if—"

At that moment, who should come swishing into the room but Honey. my wife, very pretty indeed in a white ruffled dress, her gold hair shining dazzling.

Campwell lowers his big feet from the desktop to the floor so he will be all set to run, should the occasion arise.

"Good morning, Mrs. Weddle," he says polite. "Leave me add you are looking prettier this morning than a—"

She sizzles him with a look that stops him cold, for she has no more use for him than a rattlesnake, believing he is a bad influence on me. Then she turns her attention from Campwell to me, causing me to shiver slightly. Although Honey is no bigger than a minute, with a sweet gentle face and baby-blue eyes, all very delightful to gaze upon, I am no longer fooled. After being married to her for a few-odd years, I know she is very full of dynamite ready to explode.

"Boys," she says, "you are not going fishing!"

"Heh, heh," Campwell chuckles feeble. "We was merely joking about—"

"It has been six weeks since you boys have done a lick of work," she goes on icy, "and I am sick and tired of seeing two strong, healthy and more-or-less able men sitting around, wearing out the seat of their pants. In short, I am fed up with William being a detective. As for you, Campwell Columbus, I—"

"Such is life, Mrs. Weddle," Campwell sighs unhappy. "Can Willie and I help it if no one wants anything detected?"

"So," Honey says, ignoring his words, "I have decided that if William doesn't do some detective work before Saturday night, Monday morning he is going back to punching cows!"

"Now, now, sweet," I say horrified.

"Mrs. Weddle," Campwell pipes up dignified, "Willie and I was working only a moment before you stepped through the door."

"I don't believe it," Honey says positive.

"Cross my heart," Campwell says. "Wasn't we, Willie?"

I choke somewhat on a swallow. "Yes, indeed, sweet."

"Doing what?" Honey asks suspicious.

"Deducting," Campwell answers. "A detective's life is full of deducting things, so we was setting here, gazing through yon window and practicing up on our deduction."

HONEY'S blue eyes narrow somewhat dangerous. "You have always been a good liar, Campwell. Continue."

Campwell turns his green eyes out the window. "For example," he says bland, "I deduct that Chancy Case is taking Matildia Termaine to the dance tomorrow night."

Honey also stares out the window. "I see Matildia, but I don't see Chancy, so how do you deduct that?"

"Very simple," Campwell says, smiling pleasant. "Matildia has just stepped out of Jessie's Dress Shop with a box which, no doubt, contains a new dress. A few minutes ago I see Chancy at the barber shop, wearing a new pair of boots and getting a haircut. Therefore, my deduction."

"Remarkable!" I say with deep admiration.

"Rubbish!" Honey scoffs. "I was talking to Matildia last night, and she said she was going to the dance with Ziff Jody."

"Speaking of Ziff Jody," I say, "I see him riding into town at the moment, and—"

"Quiet, William," Honey says. "Let the great Sherlock Holmes continue with his deductions."

Her tone of voice causes Campwell to turn slightly pale. He puts his green hat with the red feather back on his sandy hair and squints hopeful out the window at the one street of Castor Bean.

"I deduct," he mumbles, "that Sheriff Powers has heard there are owlhooters in this section of the country."

"How so?" Honey asks cool.

"I can see him through his office window, pacing nervous back and forth."

"Today," Honey says scornful, "the Simms Mine is sending a gold shipment on the stage to the express office here in Castor Bean. That is why the sheriff is nervous."

"But," I say, "if Powder-horn Hodson is riding guard, there is nothing to worry about, for Powder-horn is a good—"

"Quiet, William. Let Campwell do some more deducting."

"I deduct," Campwell says nervous, "that Joe Bitten has come to Castor Bean this week for supplies instead of his brother Lem, for I see Joe riding from town with a sack."

"Maybe you are looking at Chancy Case instead of Joe Bitten," Honey says sarcastic. "At that distance and with their backs to you, Joe and Chancy look like twin brothers."

"But," Campwell says triumphant, "I recognize Joe's hoss."

"Maybe Joe and Chancy have traded horses," Honey says.

Campwell's Adam's apple does a flip-flop, and I can see he is thinking as fast as possible.

"Ah, ha!" he says sudden. "Chancy is getting his hair cut, so—"

At that instant, the front door whams open, and Ziff Jody rushes into the room.

"Boys," he says hoarse, "I am a desperate man, or I wouldn't of come to you two fat-heads for help, knowing there ain't two lazier skunks within a hundred miles of Castor Bean."

AT THAT moment, he sees Honey, and being a middle-aged bachelor not accustomed to females, starts to remove his Stetson.

"Howdy-do, Mrs. Weddle," he says. "I thought Willie and Campwell was alone, or I wouldn't of said—"

He does not remove his hat, but turns very red in the face.

"I have changed my mind about asking you boys to take my case," he sputters and heads for the door.

But Honey is up and after him as quick as a wink, grabbing him by the arm and pushing him into a chair.

"Sit down, Mr. Jody," she says, "and tell us your troubles."

Ziff looks scared and pats his face with a handkerchief. "This is a no little private matter," he says hoarse.

"Mr. Jody," Honey says, looking him in the eye, " you can depend on me to keep your personal secrets. Also, it will be to your advantage to take me into your confidence for, as you know, it is next to impossible to get William and Campwell to do any work. But I—" she stands very straight and sticks out her small round chin—"will personally see to it that they go to work immediately on your case."

I can see that Ziff is no little impressed by what she has said. Of a sudden, he makes up his mind.

"Look," he says and removes his Stetson. And what do we see but a very shiny bald head, which is a great surprise to us, for any other time we have seen Ziff without his hat, he has had a head covered with curly black hair very handsome.

"Gone," he says husky. "I washed it last night before I went to bed an' hung it out to dry. This mornin' it was gone!"

I am struck speechless, but not Campwell.

"How can a man hang his hair out to dry an—"

"Hush, Campwell," Honey says. "So you hung your toupee out to dry, Mr. Jody."

"Toupee!" Campwell and I exclaim together, never before knowing Ziff wore a wig, it fitting him as good as anybody's hair.

"Yes," Ziff says sad. "I have managed to keep my baldness a secret ever since I took over the Lazy-J ranch last year. But now, if I don't get my toupee back—"

"There is no crime in being bald," Campwell gulps.

"Hush," Honey says frigid. "You see, Mr. Jody has a date with Matildia Termaine to the dance tomorrow night and he does not wish Matildia to know he is bald."

"Exactly," Ziff sighs. "If Matildia finds out I am bald, I won't have a chance against Chancy Case."

"And," Honey says, "for that reason, you are willing to hire William and Campwell to recover your lost hair."

Ziff nods his bald head emphatic.

"Their fee," Honey goes on, smiling pleasant, "will be fifty dollars."

Ziff pales slightly and starts to protest. But one look into Honey's blue eyes tells him she means business.

"Fifty dollars if they return my toupee before Saturday night," he says hoarse. "Not a cent if they don't."

"Mr. Jody," Honey says, "the boys will do their best."

"Thank you, Mrs. Weddle," Ziff says.

He puts on his Stetson, pulls it down to his ears and departs.

Honey takes a meaningful step toward Campwell and I. "Boys," she says, "you have a job to do, so get busy."

SHE SMILES sweet at us, but her eyes are as frosty as a morning in January. She doubles one small fist and raps it gentle on the desk, turns and swishes out of the office.

"Willie," Campwell says husky, "it is going to be a very hot day in the sun."

"None-the-less," I say, "we must go to the Lazy-J."

He picks up his green hat, straightens the feather and sets it on his head. With an unsteady hand, he opens the desk drawer and fishes out our detective equipment, including a tape measure, magnifying glass, false whiskers, and the badge the correspondence school sent us when we graduated into detectives.

"Leave us be on our way," he says.

We stumble out to the stable, saddle our horses and ride from town, both knowing that sitting in the shade with fishpoles would be more enjoyable than looking for lost hair. But we also know that disobeying Honey is very risky indeed, although I have no regrets being married to her except at times like this.

By and by, we enter the scattered timber of the foothills, and Campwell tickles his long nose thoughtful with the red feather.

"Willie, by riding a mile or so out of our way, we could go by the Beaver Dam Pool where at the catfish abound."

Upon arriving at the pool, he murmurs, "It so happens that I have a fish line and a few-odd hooks in my saddle bag."

At that moment, a big cat swishes his tail, making a splashy bubble very exciting to behold. We fish for an hour or so, but do not hook one single cat.

"We might as well give up," Campwell says at last. "Every time a fish bites, I see Honey tapping her fist on the desk. A man cannot outwit a fish under such circumstances."

With this, I agree, and soon we are once more on our way.

Sometime later, we come out of the timber, and before us stands the Lone Eagle Schoolhouse and the cottage wherein the teacher lives, she being none other than Matildia Termaine, a spinster of some years and slightly skinny, with black hair and a faint mustache. Just as we ride into the yard, she comes around the house, looking no little furious.

"Ah, ha!" she cries. "Mr. Columbus and Mr. Weddle, the Castor Bean detectives!"

"At yore service, Madam," Campwell says gallant.

"Today," Matildia says, "I purchased a new red dress to wear to the Saturday night dance. I hung it out on the line to let the wrinkles shake out of it, and someone stole it. Therefore, I wish to hire you two gentlemen to recover it."

Campwell's green eyes narrow somewhat. "Miss Termaine," he asks, "do you suspicion who is the thief?"

"I'm positive I know who did it. Peg-leg Pete, that crazy old sailor who's turned hermit and thinks he can paint pictures."

"Why Peg-leg?"

"I heard him say, 'Avast, you lubber! Ship ahoy!' The next thing I knew, my dress had disappeared."

"For two dollars," Campwell says pleasant, "us detectives will ride over to Peg-leg's and recover yore dress."

I AM NO little astounded to see her fish two ones from a pocket and hand same to Campwell; but I realize she does

not know Campwell as well as I do, therefore she is more trusting.

He puts the two bills into a pocket, tips his green hat polite and says, "Madam, you need worry no further. The Castor Bean Detective Agency always gets its man!"

Once again, we change our course, heading back into the timber along the foothills toward Peg-leg's home. In a short time, we arrive at the oldster's house, which is nothing but a shanty amongst the pines and cottonwoods, and there is Peg-leg himself sitting on a stool, painting a picture looking like nothing I have ever seen before, with a fat black crow perched on one shoulder and a chipmonk sitting on the other.

He does not see us until Campwell says, "Greetings, friend."

Peg-leg gives a start. The chipmonk leaps to the ground and scampers under a rock. The crow lets out a squawk and flies up into a tree. Peg-leg stumbles to an upright position and glares at us from amongst his long white hair and whiskers.

"Avast, yuh lubbers!" he says indignant. "What's the blasted idea of scarin' away a gent's pets thusly?"

Campwell paws the detective badge from a pocket and holds it up for Peg-leg to see.

"Friend, we are the Castor Bean Detective Agency and—"

Peg-leg interrupts with some very strong language he learned aboard ship. "I know who yuh two swabs are," he says. "Yuh're nobody but Campwell Columbus an' Willie Weddle."

"None-the-less," Campwell says dignified, "we are bonyfide detectives and have come to recover the red dress yuh stole from Matildia Termaine."

I can see Peg-leg's eyes are blazing, no little fierce.

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about," he roars.

"Either trot out said garment," Campwell says cool, "or Willie and I will search yore cabin from top to bottom and—"

The words die in Campwell's scrawny throat, for Peg-leg has of a sudden whipped out a wicked-looking knife from under his jacket and is pointing it very threatening at us.

"Boys," he says, "I ain't stole nobody's dress and I ain't goin' to have you two baboons nosing around my cabin. If you ain't out of my sight by the time I count to five—"

Campwell and I wait to hear no more, but wheel our mounts and ride rapid from sight into the timber.

"Willie," Campbell says, mopping up the cold beads of sweat off his bony face, "since we have Matildia's money, there is no sense in irritating Peg-leg further."

"Yes, indeed," I agree. "But why would Peg-leg want Matildia's red dress?"

"No telling," Campwell replies. "Anybody who would let a crow and a chipmonk set on his shoulders while he paints them crazy pictures is somewhat off the beam, anyway you look at it."

We say no more until we arrive at the Lazy-J ranch, where at we observe Ziff Jody pacing back and forth on the front porch, with his Stetson pulled down to his ears and a worried frown on his face.

"Just in time for dinner," he says unenthusiastic. "Well, if yuh don't mind eatin' with a gent who don't take off his hat when he eats, come on in."

We do not mind in the least.

AT LAST, Campwell pushes back from the table. "Friend," he says, smiling content, "as soon as Willie and I have took our afternoon siesta, we will begin our detecting."

"With my hair gone, there ain't no time for siestas," Ziff says firm.

Looking somewhat unhappy, Campwell rises to his feet. "Leave us have a look at the scene of the crime," he murmurs.

Ziff leads the way upstairs to his bedroom where a window overlooks the front porch.

"Gents," he says, pointing through the window, "I hung my toupee on that nail to dry where at it would be out of sight of anybody below. I might add that nobody could get to it except by coming through my room, and I am a light sleeper."

Campwell whips out his magnifving glass and studies the nail businesslike. "Very interesting, indeed," he says. Then his green eyes widen slightly, and I see he is looking at a ladder hanging on the side of the smokehouse nearby. Smiling superior, he steps out on the porch roof, unrolls his tape and measures the distance to the ground.

"Mr. Jody," he says, "kindly state the length of yon ladder."

"If yuh think somebody used that ole ladder to climb up here an' steal my wig, yuh're batty," Ziff says. "It ain't strong enough to hold Peg-leg Pete."

"Peg-leg Pete?" Campwell says, blinking rapid.

"Well, I figure he's been snoopin' around the place. Heard him yellin', 'Avast, yuh lubber. Ship, ahoy.' "

Campwell merely smiles and shakes his head. He leads the way out to the ladder where he measures it careful.

"Mr. Jody," he says, "consider the case solved. Before sunset, yuh will have yore wig back, or my name ain't—"

"Campwell," Ziff says disgusted, "yuh can see the ladder is covered with dust an' ain't been used for years. Besides, Peg-leg would have trouble, climbin' any kind of a ladder."

Campwell continues to smile confident. "Mr. Jody, to a trained detective such as I, all is clear. Come, Willie, leave us be on our way to recover our client's toupee."

After we are some distance from the Lazy-J, I say, Campwell, I am somewhat confused as to who is guilty."

"Do not feel bad, Willie," he says kindly, "because you are not a natural born detective such as I. And, may I add, solving this case was merely a matter of simple deduction."

"Kindly explain," I beg.

"Willie, who is Ziff's rival for Matildia's attention? Chancy Case or Peg-leg Pete?"

"Chancy Case," I answer.

"Precisely. Last night, Chancy sneaked to the Lazy-J, took the ladder, climbed up and stole Ziff's hair, then returned the ladder to the smokehouse. Being a small man, he did not break the old ladder. Being also smart, he sprinkled dust over the ladder after hanging it up to make it look unused."

"But," I protest," how did Chancy know about Ziff hanging his hair out to dry?"

"Humm," Campwell says, frowning beneath his green hat. "That is a point I failed to consider, but none-the-less, Chancy is our man. He has a motive, and leave us keep in mind Professor Zimbull's famous quotation: 'When yuh have found the motive, yuh have found the guilty party.' "

I SAY NO more, for I realize that Professor Zimbull of the correspondence school is smarter than I. So I ride in silence beside Campwell through the timber toward the stage-coach road which goes by Chancy Case's homestead.

Presently we emerge from amongst the pines into a weed-choked clearing, and before us stands a two-story house built many years ago by a rich gold miner who somebody murdered, and now it is rumored that the place is haunted by his ghost.

Campwell pulls his mount to a halt and stares thoughtfully at the old house with its busted windows.

"Willie," he asks, "do you believe in ghosts?"

"Not in the daytime," I answer truthful.

"Neither do I," he says. "As I recall it, yon house still retains some of the furniture, including a bed or two. Personally I would enioy an afternoon nap."

I cannot help but stare admiringly at him.

"Since we have practically recovered Ziff Jody's hair," he goes on, "leave us investigate the possibilities of said haunted house. In the cool of the evening, we will ride on to Chancy Case's domicile."

We tie our horses to what is left of a fence and wade through the weeds to the front door which hangs by one hinge. Inside, it is somewhat dusty and gloomy, but pleasantly cool.

"Willie," Campwell says, gazing about the front room at the odds and ends of furniture, "see if you can find something

to brush the cobwebs and dust off yon lounge for me. Then you can search for a bed for yoreself."

I head for what was once the kitchen, but am stopped by a pair of somewhat worn Levi's draped over a chairback.

"This is funny peculiar," I say, picking up the Levi's. "Why would anybody leave his pants here?"

"Leave me have a look, Willie," Campwell says, "and I will do some deducting concerning the owner of these pants. Incidental, is there anything in the pockets?"

I find in the pockets nothing but some fence staples and a bent nail.

Campwell studies the bent nail through his magnifying glass.

"I deduct," he says, returning the articles to the pockets of the Levi's, "that these pants belong to a hardworking gent who is honest and thrifty."

"How do you deduct that?" I inquire.

"Who but a thrifty gent would save a bent nail? Also—"

At that moment, a horrible screech rends the air, and a voice rasps, "Avast, yuh lubbers! Ship, ahoy!"

Campwell drops the Levi's on the chair. "Peg-leg Pete must be upstairs," he says. "Leave us go see what the old maverick is doing."

We rush upstairs, but there is nothing there except cobwebs and dust. I glance at Campwell and discover that his bony face has lost some color.

"Ship, ahoy!" the voice says harsh through the window.

We hurry to the broken window, but there is nobody in sight.

"Willie," Campwell says huskily, "I do not like a voice coming from nowhere."

WE GO downstairs cautious and out into the open and sneak about the house. There is no one any place to be seen.

"Avast, yuh lubbers!" the voice from nowhere says.

"Willie," Campwell whispers shaky, "when a voice comes out of nowhere, it can belong only to a ghost!"

He leaps into his saddle, and I into mine, and we ride at a fast clip toward the stage road.

"Willie," Campwell husks, "I have a new theory concerning Ziff Jody's hair, which is no little terrifying. From this moment on, I am having nothing to do with recovering it!"

I feel a great coldness up and down my spine, for I have an idea what he is thinking. But I say, "Explain further."

"Willie, the ghost of the murdered miner is on a rampage, for some reason or other, which is not for such as you and I to deduct. He has stole Ziff's hair and Matildia's red dress, trying to blame it on Peg-leg Pete, and has whisked them away to places unknown."

"Also, some honest and thrifty gent's pants," I say. "He was on the point of whisking them away when we interrupted him."

"Precisely! Leave us ride to the stage road and follow it back to town."

"Honey," I say sudden, "does not believe in ghosts."

Campwell slows his horse, looking as if he has seen a second ghost, much more terrifying than the first.

"Willie," he says, "I am glad you mentioned that before we returned to town. Leave us ride on over to spend the day with Joe and Lem Bitten. Although they are bachelors and poor cooks and not very pleasant company, I have a feeling no ghost would fool with them."

With this, I agree, for both Joe and Lem are too scrappy and mean to put up with any nonsense from a ghost. Especially Joe, although he is a smallish gent not looking so tough.

We ride in uneasy silence until we come to the stage road, and what should we see sitting on a stump but a woman in a red dress, holding a baby all wrapped up in a blanket in her arms, with a shawl tied over her head. Seeing us, she stands up and hugs the baby tighter. As we ride closer, she ducks her head, hiding her face and looking sad and bedraggled.

"Good-day, Madam," Campwell says, taking off his green hat.

She lifts her face and sighs forlorn, but says nothing.

"Madam," Campwell says," "this is indeed a lonely spot for a lady and her baby to be in, and if you are lost or in trouble, me and my partner will be delighted to assist—"

"Hands up!" a deadly voice says from behind a bush.

A gent with his face hid behind a black mask steps out with a gun in each hand, pointed steady at Campwell and I.

"Get off them hosses," he says to us. "Get a rope," he says to the woman, "an' tie these buzzards up."

Without a word, the woman lays her baby on the stump, disappears amidst the bushes and returns with a lariat. The masked gent orders Campwell and I to lay down, and the woman ties us hand and foot very secure. After this, the gent drags us into the bushes, while the woman shoos our horses into the timber from sight. Then she returns to the road, picks up the baby and sits down on the stump again.

THE GENT gives Campwell and I a glinty look from out of his eyes. "Boys," he says raspy, "one peep outa you, and I will blow out yore brains!"

Campwell and I do not peep.

Presently the woman stands up, and the gent crouches down in the bushes and pays no more attention to us.

Looking from where I lay with numerous sharp rocks gouging my ribs, I can see the road to the west. There is a sound of horses and wheels rattling, and the stage comes into view with the driver and Powder-horn Hodson sitting on top, armed to the teeth. Of a sudden, I recall what Honey said about the gold shipment from the Simms Mine.

Seeing the woman with the baby, the driver pulls the horses to a stop. Powder-horn lowers his rifle to stare down at her.

"Gentlemen," she says in a quavery voice, "me and my baby are sick and must get to a doctor. Would you please help—"

She takes a step forward and crumples to the ground in a dead faint. Both driver and guard drop their guns and leap to the ground to assist her. At that moment, the masked gent steps from the bushes and points his sixes businesslike.

"Hist yore hands!" he rasps. "This is a stick-up!"

The woman puts down her baby, gets Powder-horn's guns and then heaves a small iron-bound box from out of the boot. Before Campwell and I can count to ten backwards, it is all over, the woman and the gent disappearing into the timber with the loot and the baby, and Powder-horn and the driver cussing furious and driving away rapid toward Castor Bean.

Campwell and I are left there helpless and staring at each other.

"Willie," he gurgles, "leave us try to escape our bonds."

We try, but cannot loosen the ropes the least bit.

"Willie," Campwell says, his face no little pale, "who knows, perhaps we are doomed to die of starvation."

This is indeed a gloomy prospect, and I cannot help but think of Honey, and that I will likely never see her again.

An hour or so later, we hear a gust of cusswords, followed by the blast of a shotgun.

From amongst the branches of a tall cottonwood, there comes a screech, and a black crow flies into the air zig-zaggy and disappears amongst the trees.

"Help is at hand," I say. "I will shout for—"

"Hush!" Campwell hisses. "Remember the masked owlhooter told us to keep quiet."

We lay there, not making a single sound and watching the cottonwood. Presently what should we see but Ziff Jody climbing up into the top of the tree, his bald head gleaming in the sun. Soon he stops climbing and reaches into a cluster of leaves, pulling out something which looks like a black furry animal. After this, he climbs back down from our sight and we do not see him any more.

"Campwell," I say, "leave us call to Ziff for help."

This we do.

SOON Ziff finds us, and looking at him, we are surprised to see that he has hair on his head and is very happy indeed about it after getting over surprised at seeing us.

"What happened?" he asks, untying us.

We explain about the robbery, but he does not seem to care, one way or another, having something else on his mind.

"Boys," he says, "as yuh see, I have recovered my toupee."

Then he goes on to tell how he saw a crow sneaking around the roof of his front porch, and recalling how crows are great to steal things, followed this crow through the timber to its nest in the cottonwood.

"And shore enough," he says, "that danged crow had stole my wig to use in makin' his nest. Incidental," he says, giving Campwell and I a fierce scowl, "if it ever gets nosed around I am bald-headed, I will tear yuh two coyotes limb from limb an' feed the pieces to the buzzards! Understand?"

"Yes, indeed!" Campwell and I say hasty.

Ziff departs, and Campwell and I wander along the road to look for our horses. But before we find them, we hear hoofs pounding toward us, and instantaneous, shooting begins with bullets whizzing very dangerous about us.

"A posse!" I cry, ducking into the timber.

Campwell also ducks, and we begin to run away rapid.

"The trouble with Sheriff Powers and his posse," Campwell pants, "they shoot first and ask questions afterwards."

Of a sudden, he heads into a dim trail and says, "The old haunted house, Willie. Maybe we can hide there."

I am too breathless to argue, so follow at his heels. Shortly we are inside the house and sit down to recover our wind, him on the lounge and me on the chair.

"Campwell," I say, glancing about, "there is a stick of stovewood on the floor. It wasn't there a while ago."

"Willie," he says, "what are you setting on?"

I look down, and what I see makes me leap to my feet. Draped over the chair is a bright red dress.

"Willie," Campwell says gulpy, "only a few minutes ago, there was a pair of pants on that chair. And now—that shows what a ghost can do. Leave us get out of here, posse or no!"

"Hold everything!" a voice says through a window.

Glancing sideways, I see the muzzle of a gun behind which is the round, red face of Sheriff Powers with a dangerous glint in his eyes. The next moment, Campwell and I are surrounded by numerous citizens of Castor Bean with guns and grim faces, and the sheriff is holding up the red dress.

"Caught with the evidence," he says gritty. "Didn't think yuh boys had brains enough to fool Powder-horn into thinkin' one of yuh was a woman, while the other got the drop on him."

We try to explain that we are innocent, pointing out we have no guns and no loot. But there is no explaining to such a hardhead as Sheriff Powers. Besides he does not like us, anyway, and nothing would suit him better than to lock us up in jail, which he does the moment we arrive in Castor Bean.

IT IS after dark, and we have had nothing to eat and are very miserable indeed when we hear a voice belonging to Honey.

"Sheriff," she says, "what is this I hear about you locking up William and Campwell for robbing the stage?"

Sheriff Powers mumbles for a time, and then Honey says distinct, "That's the craziest thing I ever heard. Let me have a look at that red dress. Ah, ha! Just as I thought. Bring William and that lowdown, no-good Campwell Columbus out here, and I'll prove they are innocent."

Soon we are in the sheriff's office.

"Boys," Honey says, "no doubt you muffed the case I sent you on, and I should let you stay in jail the rest of your lives. Especially you, Campwell. But

since I have married William for better or worse, I will get you out of here. While I turn around, try on this dress."

Campwell and I do so, and discover the dress is much too small for either of us. Even a dumb-ox like Sheriff Powers can see that Campwell nor I did not wear the dress to rob the stage.

"All right," he says, looking mad. "So yuh dead-beats didn't hold-up the stage, an' I can't collect the reward. But—"

The front door whams open, and who should come in, whiskers and all hobbling noisy, but Peg-leg Pete, carrying a fat dead crow in his hands.

"Ship, ahoy, Sheriff!" he wheezes. "My talking crow has been murdered, an' I know who done it!"

"Talking crow!" Powers gawps.

"Aye, aye. Learned him to say, 'Avast, yuh lubber. Ship, ahoy.' "

Her blue eyes sympathetic, Honey steps forward. "Who murdered your poor pet crow?" she asks kindly.

"I reckon Chancy Case did it," Peg-leg answers, brushing a tear off his whiskers. "Only this mornin', I seen him sneakin' through the timber. Figured he'd been over to see Matildia. But now—"

"Chancy couldn't of done it," Powers mumbles. "He was in town all mornin' at the barber shop."

"Why," Campwell says helpful, "Willie and I saw—" He clamps his mouth shut very tight, no doubt recalling that he must not let the cat out of the bag concerning Ziff's toupee.

"Saw what?" Sheriff Powers demands.

"Saw that crow flyin' around," Campwell says faint.

"Why don't yuh two brainless wonders go take a walk," Powers says disgusted.

"Follow me, boys," Honey says.

No little nervous, we trail her to the Castor Bean Detective office, where at she makes us sit down, facing the light.

"Boys," she says brisk, "I wish to hear from you exactly what happened today, including ghosts talking, Levi's turning into a red dress, and a woman and a baby stopping the stage. And did the baby cry or make any sound?"

WE TELL her everything from A to Z exactly as it happened.

After we have finished, she smiles dimply. "Now I know," she says happy, "who robbed the stage."

Campwell and I can only stare at her.

"Who, at a distance," she asks, "resembles Chancy Case?"

"Joe Bitten," Campwell says. "But Joe nor his brother, Lem, ain't got a baby—"

Honey stops him with a lift of her small, white hand. "Nevertheless, the Bitten brothers robbed the stage," she says positive. "Chancy was in town all morning, so it was Joe whom Peg-leg saw sneaking through the timber. Joe had stolen Maltildia's red dress. He put it on in the haunted house and left his Levi's draped over the chair. The talking crow scared you boys away from the house in time to see Joe dressed like a woman, waiting for the stage. It was the crow that Matildia and Ziff heard."

"But the baby?" Campwell gurgles.

"What you thought was a baby was the stick of stovewood wrapped in a blanket. After the robbery, Joe returned to the old house, changed back into his Levi's and left the stovewood on the floor, and the dress on the chair."

"But how can yuh prove—"

"All the sheriff has to do is to go out to the Bitten place and make Joe turn his pockets wrong-side out. If he has staples and a bent nail in his pockets, he's the man. As for the loot, let's see. It should be around the Bitten place somewhere. No doubt, buried in the hay."

It is the next morning, and Campwell and I are sitting in the office of the Castor Bean Detective Agency.

"Willie," Campwell asks, breaking the long, gloomy silence, "did Honey mention anything about slipping I and you a few-odd dollars from the reward money she collected for proving that Joe and Lem Bitten robbed the stage and for finding the loot in their haymow?"

I can only shake my head a strong negative and listen to Campwell sighing deep under his green hat with the red feather sticking up out of the band.

This is the story of a "coward" who wanted to be forgotten, and of a general who wanted to be unforgettable. Each got his wish one bloody—

SPRING CAMPAIGN

by CLIFTON ADAMS

JUNIOR SERGEANT Croy Henderson awoke with the first sergeant kicking solidly at the soles of his boots. "Rise and shine, bucko. You too, Mayhew." Corporal Mayhew groped sluggishly, cursing his tormentor.

"What time is it?" Henderson asked.

"Near midnight, but that don't make no difference in this man's cavalry. Reveille. Rise and shine." He went beating his way through the darkness, searching out the tired men of G Company, waking them.

Bonheur was laboriously lifting a pistol

Corporal Mayhew said. "What do you make of it, Henderson?"

Henderson knew what it meant. He could feel it in his bones, in the ache of his guts. But he said nothing.

"I'll tell you what it means," an unidentified voice said. "It means a fight with the Sioux. Ever since we left Terry and Gibbon on the Powder, Custer's been driving this command like a crazy man. He's scared to death somebody will get to the Sioux before he does and cheat him out of a piece of glory."

"Enough of that," the first sergeant said roughly, returning through the company area. "Get your horses and form on me. We're moving out in half an hour."

At one o'clock the U.S. Seventh Cavalry Regiment moved out under cover of darkness. Half drunk with fatigue, the men rode without speaking. It had been six weeks since they had ridden proudly from Fort Lincoln to the melancholy strains of the regimental song, *Garryowen.* Now their uniforms were ragged, their beards matted and long, their bodies caked with the whitish alkali dust of the Dakota badlands.

They could look into the darkness and sense that their journey was about ended. The Sioux had been pushed as far as he was going to be pushed. He was on his home ground now, the heaving black land of the Rosebud, the Tongue, the Powder. And up ahead somewhere there was another river, not as well known as the others—the Little Big Horn.

The mile-long column of cavalry and trains traveled upgrade, along the coiling banks of the Rosebud. Toward three o'clock, gray shot the east; an hour later the darkness overhead began to vanish, and the column halted for breakfast.

Henderson was sunk deep in his own thoughts and fears and hates as he got wood together for a fire and fried bacon and boiled coffee. All the time a single name whirled in his tired mind—Bonheur. *Lieutenant* Stanley H. Bonheur. The name had dogged Henderson for a month, ever since he had seen the lieutenant and discovered that he was an officer in one of the Seventh's far-flung companies—a company which had only recently been recalled from Louisiana to join the regiment for the spring campaign.

WHEN Henderson had first glimpsed the lieutenant on the parade at Lincoln, fear had been a live red thing in his bowels. Slowly it had burned itself out, and now there was only a numbness and a vague sickness. Each day he expected Bonheur to find him, to open the records again and recall the shame.

After breakfast, the men rested while Bloody Hand sent his Ree scouts out once more in search of the Sioux. Henderson, through the army grapevine, had learned something of General Terry's orders to Custer. He knew that Custer was supposed to lead the Seventh to the Little Big Horn, meet Gibbon's column as it came up by a different route and catch the Sioux in a nutcracker.

Henderson also knew that Custer would probably do as he pleased, now that he had separated himself from his superior officer, and that when the time came for fighting, it would be the Seventh Cavalry against the entire Sioux nation. If that happened, the chances were a hundred to one against a man's coming out alive.

All the men were thinking about that. Some of them were writing letters to be delivered to their families back at Lincoln. Sergeant Henderson had no letters to write. He had no family and no home. Lieutenant Stanley Bonheur had seen to that.

Henderson had tried to train himself to think objectively about the thing that had happened so long ago. He had since seen it happen to other men—good, tough men with more battle experience than he had had at the time; and he had learned that it was not necessarily the end of a man. Still it made a man bitter to be branded a coward. It lived forever on record books. It defied a man to use his own name.

For a short time, Henderson had almost come to believe that he had outlived it. Four years ago he had rejoined the cavalry under another name, for a man had to be

sure of himself before he could set about regaining the things he had lost. That was why he had selected the Seventh, a fighting regiment. He could look back over those four years without shame. Three campaigns against the Sioux and Cheyenne; wounded twice and decorated once by General Custer himself. Surely a record like that would make a difference when the time came to judge a man.

But he had forgotten Bonheur. Bonheur the blacksmith's son in Henderson's home town back in Ohio. Bonheur the captain of Henderson's company of Ohio volunteers during the Civil War. Last, but not the least important, the Bonheur who had loved Lily Clarron, as Henderson himself had done.

Henderson attempted to recall the image of the lovely Lily Clarron. It was no use. It had all happened too long ago.

Henderson smiled briefly, completely without humor, as he lay face up, staring at the blue Dakota sky. What good had it done, joining the cavalry again and proving to himself that he was no less than other men? He might have known that sooner or later he would meet Bonheur again.

Even as he was thinking of it, a long shadow fell across Henderson's face. He lay dead still for a moment, the weight of the shadow seeming to crush him. He heard the nervous scamper of a horse. Slowly, he turned his head, knowing before he looked that Stan Bonheur had found him.

"Well, Sergeant," a voice said roughly, "don't you know enough to come to attention before an officer?"

Henderson drew himself to his knees, stood slowly. It seemed that a thousand years had passed and that every minute had been spent in dread of this moment. Strangely, however, now that the moment had arrived, there was little feeling or fear within him.

He said, "Hello, Stan."

"Lieutenant Bonheur, and don't you forget it, Sergeant!"

Henderson felt the blood leave his face. "Yes, sir. Lieutenant Bonheur."

THE lieutenant smiled, and his smile said that he had been waiting for this moment also, but with relish. He was a thickset, wiry-bearded man with amazingly hard black eyes. Henderson was startled for a moment when he noted how Bonheur had aged. Then he realized that he, too, must have aged in those years since the war.

"Well, well," the lieutenant said dryly, "so you got back in the cavalry? What name are you using, Sergeant? Surely not your real one?"

Henderson said nothing, and the lieutenant laughed. "It doesn't matter. I'll find out what name you're using. General Custer will be interested to learn that he has a man in his regiment who was discharged once for bolting in the face of the enemy." He chuckled softly, only his eyes showing the viciousness of his hate.

"You never did come home after the court martial," the lieutenant went on with false pleasantness. "Lily used to ask about you when I went back on leave. You understand, of course, that I had to tell her what had happened."

Henderson would not beg anything for himself of this man, but he had to know about her.

He said, "Is she . . . all right? I suppose you're married now."

The lieutenant's gaze darkened, and he said, without thinking, "I believe she married a hardware man." Then he realized that he had revealed himself, and sudden anger replaced the sham humor. "Don't get to liking that uniform, Sergeant," he snapped, wheeling his horse. "You won't be wearing it after today."

Bonheur spurred his horse toward the head of the column, and Henderson knew that he was going to talk to the company commander. Before the hour was up the story would have gone all the way to Custer.

Helpless fury swept over Henderson, threatening to drown his senses.

Four hard years in the cavalry would bring him nothing but more disgrace. Still, there had been some comfort come from this meeting with Bonheur. He had

not married Lily. Although he had pushed the court martial relentlessly to get Henderson out of the way, she had married someone else.

That, Henderson thought, explained the almost insane hate in Bonheur's eyes. For a moment Henderson remembered that the hate had always been there, even when they were boys in Ohio. It was bitter irony now to remember that in those days Henderson had had everything and Bonheur had had nothing. Henderson's father was in the freighting business, a respectable gentleman of wealth, in that small Ohio town of the early 1860s. Bonheur had been a blacksmith's son. That meant a great deal in their small town, where social lines were strictly drawn and jealously guarded.

That impenetrable social wall had not seemed so important to him at the time, Henderson remembered. But then, he had never viewed it from Bonheur's side. Shortly after Sumter was fired on Bonheur had raised a company of volunteers, enlisting Henderson as a second lieutenant. Bonheur, of course, was the captain. It was all very grand for a time, the company drilling in an open field west of town, in their makeshift uniforms and castoff relics of rifles, while the townspeople looked on with a pride.

But the glory was brief. Quickly, as the company was made part of a regiment and shipped to the front, the war took on the ghastliness of a nightmare. The war, for Henderson, turned into endless months of almost unbearable fatigue as Bonheur drove the company savagely through a dimly remembered wilderness of death. Bacon Creek, Blowing Green, Nashville. And finally Chickamauga.

EXACTLY what happened on the banks of that blood-tinted stream, Henderson never knew. There was a vague recollection of rifles ahead of him. He could not move. The will of his mind no longer controlled the muscles of his arms and legs. How long he lay there he did not know, but it did not seem such a long while before he lifted his head and saw Bonheur standing over him, grinning.

"Mister Godamighty himself," Bonheur said dryly, "hiding face-down in the grass while his company does the fighting. You're under arrest, Lieutenant, for bolting in the face of the enemy!"

Now it all welled up anew in Henderson's mind as he watched Bonheur ride off toward the head of the column. He watched the lieutenant approach Major Reno. He stood woodenly, waiting for the sky to fall, wondering if he could live through the jeers and contempt all over again. Then, as Reno was returning the lieutenant's salute, Custer and his staff came riding toward the point of the column. Reno broke away. In another moment the order came down:

"Mount up! We're moving out."

There was little relief in knowing that Bonheur had not gone through the entire chain of command with his story, or that the story had not had time to circulate among the men. It could be done later. Bonheur would see to that. G Company swung wearily into saddles, weighted heavily with extra bandoleers of ammunition. Slowly the column began to move. Word was spread that the Crow scouts had spotted a heavy Sioux concentration beyond a far ridge and that Custer was not going to wait for help. He was taking the Seventh in to go it alone.

They reached high ground, and the general went forward with his scouts to survey the land. Every eye in the regiment seemed to be fixed on Custer's enormous campaign hat, on his tight-gaited, buckskin-clad figure as he and Blood Hand discussed the situation.

Corporal Mayhew, riding beside Henderson, said worriedly, "You think Custer'll cross Terry and try to whip the Sioux by himself, Henderson?"

Henderson sat his saddle heavily, only half his mind on Mayhew. "What do you think?"

"I think maybe he's going to lose himself a regiment of cavalry if he tries it. Bloody Hand claims there's two thousand Sioux down there in the valley. Maybe more."

But Henderson was paying scant atten-

tion; his mind was still on Bonheur. He wondered what Mayhew would say when the court-martial records were opened. The column moved again, up to the rise and down into the valley of the Rosebud. Off to the west Henderson could see a ragged outline of willows and brush. Mayhew pointed it out.

"That's the Little Big Horn. Pretty, ain't it? Wish I could just gallop over there and fill my canteen."

The sun became a brilliant, blazing eye in an endless stretch of blue as Custer and his scouts continued their conference. Henderson's eyes were pulled continually toward M Company where Bonheur was. Then, as Henderson watched, he saw the lieutenant ride out of position and slide down the column toward G.

Grinning tightly, Bonheur pulled alongside Henderson. For a long moment he said nothing, his eyes fierce and hot. Then he leaned far out of his saddle to make sure that no one but Henderson could hear. He said hoarsely:

"I'm going to kill you, Sergeant. What do you think of that? I've been thinking about it for a long time and I've decided that's what I want to do." His grin dropped. "And you can't stop me, because I'll say you started to run like you did the other time, and I had to shoot you. They'll believe me when they see the records."

Henderson sat frozen, his mind refusing to believe what it heard.

"That's something for you to think about," said Bonheur quietly. When he spoke again his voice was hard with hate. "Do you want to know why I'm going to kill you? It's because you always figured you were Godamighty, and now I aim to show you different. Your father's money and land and stores won't help you now, will they, Sergeant? *Will they, Sergeant?*"

Mayhew looked around, startled. Bonheur lowered his voice again. "Think about it, Sergeant. Think about it good and hard!" He wheeled his horse and rode back to his company.

"Since when," Corporal Mayhew said, frowning, "did officers come down to jawing with common soldiers?"

HENDERSON looked at him sharply, but Mayhew had already forgotten the question in his worry about the Sioux across the divide. The column inched

COME AN' GET IT!

NEITHER THE RANCH owner or the ranch manager's word is law when a party of cowboys are out on the range. Instead it's the cook who does all the "bossing"—at least when it comes to telling the others when to get up in the morning. And nobody in camp would think of touching a morsel of food until he gives the word—or rather, the shout, "Chuck, cowboy!"

He metes out disciplinary measures in regard to what is known as "chapping offenses." This consists of misdemeanors like tethering or riding a horse too close to the chuck wagon, or making digestive noises while eating. He also oversees the punishment that follows: The culprit lies face down on a bed-roll and is spanked in unison by the others with their chaps.

By Mark Knight

along again, Bloody Hand's scouts fanning out in front of the cavalry. The very atmosphere seemed to throb with warning. A blazing June sun beat down, drying throats, bringing out salt-sweat stains on faded uniforms. Henderson rode woodenly, telling himself that Bonheur would not dare shoot one of his own men in cold blood—but knowing all the time that he would. The lieutenant's hate was wild, irrational. His brood has magnified it so that bringing disgrace upon Henderson again was no longer enough to satisfy it.

Cray Henderson looked at the faces about him. Stone sober faces of men who realized that they were riding into a hell that a great many of them would not ride out of. Still, each face, each set of eyes, held its own desperate hope, its own secret conviction that no matter what happened he would somehow come out of it. "But not for me," Henderson thought.

Abruptly a thought struck him, and he laughed harshly to himself. Perhaps Bonheur would be disappointed after all. It was entirely possible that the Sioux, and not the lieutenant, woud have the last word as to how death would be meted out.

When they reached the bottom of the grade, Custer split up the command, throwing A, M and G Companies together under Major Reno, and he himself taking the remainder of the regiment. Excitedly, the Crow scouts came scurrying back on foot, motioning toward the west, toward the Little Big Horn. The word spread like grassfire. "The Sioux is in the valley waiting for us. Reno's going to hit them head-on with his command while Custer comes around on their flank."

Corporal Mayhew swallowed hard, drinking the last dregs from his canteen. He lifted the canteen to Henderson. "Here's cheer, Sergeant. My pay's in my shirt pocket. If I drop, take it and buy yourself a drunk when you get back to Lincoln."

Henderson wanted badly to grin and say something, but words would not come. Custer lifted a hand and waved to Reno. The major's command began to move out.

They rode cautiously, the Indian scouts still fanning out in front of them. How far they rode, or for how long, Henderson did not know. When it was possible, he kept his gaze on M Company up ahead, and on Bonheur, but often the powdery dust billowed up so as to make the point of the column invisible.

Gradually he put Bonheur to the back of his mind. After all, he told himself, the lieutenant was only one man while the Sioux were a thousand, perhaps more. Briefly the dust cleared so that the cavalry could look deep into the valley. They could see rising dust clouds at the far end and knew that the dust was full of Sioux. A white civilian scout came galloping toward the head of the column from his forward position. The word came back again: "The valley's full of Sioux! They're running from us!"

Major Reno rode out to where he could see Custer on a far rise. Custer waved frantically. *Go after them!*

"Battalion into line!" Reno shouted. "Company into line!" the troop commanders echoed. G and M Companies swung in together, and Henderson found himself only a dozen positions away from Bonheur. The lieutenant rode out front and center of his platoon, but his hard eyes were darting, searching for Henderson. He smiled thinly when he saw him, then wheeled his mount to wait for the order to charge.

The trumpet notes stabbed sharp and hard on the heels of the shouted order. The cavalry leaped forward at the gallop, rushed toward the boiling dust at the end of the valley. The dust cloud was like a rolling gray ghost, seeming always out of reach. It retreated as quietly as a phantom ahead of the cavalry and rolled across the brush-banked waters of the Little Big Horn onto another flat. Horses grunted, coughed, sneezed in the dust. Men cursed silently, furiously, as they splashed across the stream in pursuit. All at once the dust cloud began to spread. The Sioux were extending their flanks far to the left and right of the cavalry.

How many Indians were in that cloud, Henderson could not guess. He could

only hope that they were spreading their line too thin to form an effective fighting force. Still they retreated. Then, abruptly, they stopped retreating and began their charge.

SCREAMING hundreds of them came out of the dust. They hung recklessly low on their charging ponies, their brown, painted bodies dull with dust. They fired across their ponies' necks, many of them using repeating rifles, overwhelming the fire power the cavalry put up with its carbines. The Indians bore down on the cavalry's flanks, forcing them in. The cavalry began to fall back toward a line of willows and scrub trees.

Reno was bellowing hoarsely, "Prepare to fight on foot!"

In an instant the floor of the valley became a scene of madness and confusion. Horses went wild, bolting riderless toward the trees. Horse holders came forward to take what mounts they could and lead them back toward the creek. Meanwhile the cavalry was forming in a rough semicircle, kneeling, firing at the seemingly unending flood of screaming Sioux.

For a moment panic seized Henderson. The urge to run was almost overpowering in the face of the wholesale slaughter. Then he glimpsed Bonheur watching him eagerly from his position on M Company's near flank. The lieutenant was kneeling and firing coldly without a trace of emotion. He saw Henderson watching him and smiled thinly. This was not the time, the smile said. The confusion would get worse as the fight went on, the chances better.

The cavalry's left flank gave way completely as the scouts were overridden by the sheer weight of the attack. Henderson was vaguely conscious of men falling all around him. The screams of horses and men tore at his insides, sickening him. All the time he tried to keep Bonheur in his line of vision. Once he had the back of the lieutenant's head in his sights. All he had to do was pull the trigger. But he couldn't do it. He brought his carbine

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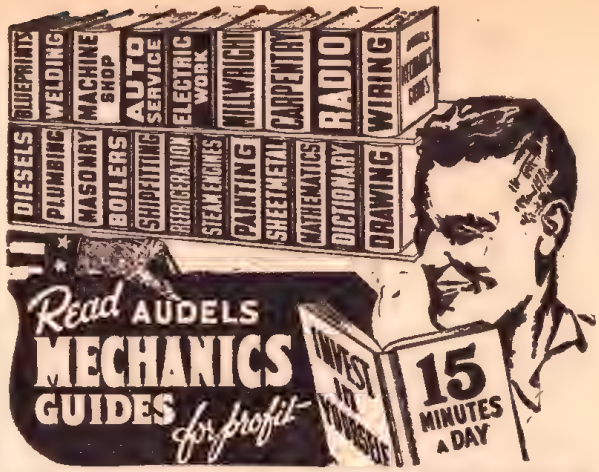

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around and carefully put the bullet into the center of a painted chest. Then he felt eyes on him and knew that someone had seen what he had almost done. He turned quickly. It was Corporal Mayhew.

The corporal looked at him strangely and then at Bonheur. But all he said was, "Where in the hell's Custer?"

They had to fall back toward the trees. The Sioux were rushing them again, trying to break them to pieces. Men began to run; and officers bawled and cursed and threatened them with leveled pistols. Many of them ran anyway.

Through a stringy cloud of gunsmoke Henderson felt Bonheur watching him again. The lieutenant was waiting for him to run, waiting for an excuse to shoot him.

Henderson would not give him that excuse. He fell back like the others, a step at a time. He felt someone fall against him. He turned and caught Corporal Mayhew as he dropped to his knees.

"I guess," Mayhew said, "I won't be going back to Lincoln."

"Sure you will," Henderson said tightly. He got the man on his hip and attempted to pull him up.

"It's no good," Mayhew said. Blood was spreading rapidly across the front of his dirty blue shirt. "Remember that pay? It's in my pocket . . ." He stopped short and lunged with all his remaining strength, and Henderson went sprawling to the ground. As he went down he felt the tight whine of a bullet past his head. Jerking around, he saw Bonheur, his pistol still pointed at him. The lieutenant's eyes were furious. Frozen, Henderson watched the pistol hammer come back to full cock; and at that moment, M Company's commander came up shouting, "Bonheur, get these men out of here!"

Corporal Mayhew's eyes were droopy, as though he had little interest in what was going on. "I don't know what that lieutenant's got against you," he said, "but . . ." He seemed to go to sleep without finishing the sentence. When Henderson felt for a pulse, there was none.

WHAT was left of Reno's command fell back to the trees where the horses were. Henderson lost sight of Bonheur completely, but there was little time to worry about him. The Sioux came again, screaming and shooting, hacking the command to pieces.

Somewhere in the trees a bugle added to the madness while men ran about senselessly, profanely demanding the whereabouts of Custer. Major Reno dashed recklessly from one unit to another, as though he thought his horse a locomotive and the trees matchsticks. He reined up hard in front of Henderson.

"Damn it, where's the company commander here, Sergeant?"

"He's dead, sir. All the officers are."

"Then take command of this company and give A and M some cover while they try to get back across the creek!" He paused neither to ask questions nor to answer them. As the major crashed through the brush toward A Company, Henderson found a horse and mounted.

"Bayridge," he called to a cursing trooper, "round up those horses in the thicket. The company is forming on me." He spurred his mount up front to a point where a part of G Company was still holding a line between the Indians and the mounting cavalry. Powdersmoke rolled heavy in the trees as he bawled and cursed and somehow got the men together. He learned from Corporal Stanford that the first sergeant was dead. "Bring the horses up to the line," he shouted. "A and M are already pulling out!"

The horses were brought up, and the troopers mounted as the Sioux made another charge. The company crashed out of the trees in no kind of formation at all, attempting to wedge in behind the retreating A Company. Major Reno came from somewhere, still bawling and cursing, his blouse torn open at the shoulder, his hat gone. He lifted a gauntleted hand to Henderson as the rear guard began to form.

"Keep it closed up, Sergeant! If you

[*Turn page*]

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string out, they'll cut you to pieces!"

Henderson fell back slightly to whip up the stragglers. Somehow they splashed back across the creek, loose horses running madly through the formation, Sioux bullets thinning what had been a battalion of cavalry down to less than a full company. Somehow they kept up the running fight, and at last they reached some high ground—what was left of them—and prepared to make a stand.

The Sioux fell back before the first volley the cavalry let go from cover. The troopers began digging in with trenching tools, knives, mess plates, whatever they had at hand. Henderson looked frantically for Bonheur, but the lieutenant was not there. Relief swept over him like cool water. Bonheur was dead. He *had* to be dead.

Through the long afternoon, until nightfall, they managed to hold off the Sioux attack. How, Henderson did not know. His mind was numb with fatigue, stunned with the shock of battle. Somehow he kept after the men of G Company, kept them digging, kept them fighting. Several times he noticed Reno watching him. He didn't care if the major liked what he saw and heard or not. He was doing the best he could.

Darkness came at last, and the Sioux stopped their attack until morning. The ground itself seemed to moan with the cries of the wounded who had not made it to the ledge. Nothing could be done for them. Sioux were everywhere, waiting for a trooper to show himself.

Henderson fell into a half-dead sleep behind his breastwork. Even in sleep he seemed to hear the moans of the wounded. He stirred restlessly, a single voice penetrating his consciousness.

"Henderson."

He awoke, hearing his name being called. He listened carefully. It came again, very weak but not far away. He moved away from his works and crawled along the rim of the high ground.

"Yes?"

"Down here. . . . Down here."

He saw it then, a vague shape in a fold

of earth below the rim. He waited a long moment before doing anything. He searched his soul, for a man's soul was all he had to look to now, and at last began to work his way down toward the fold of earth. When he reached it, he said:

"What is it, Bonheur?"

"I'm hit . . . hit bad. Have you got some water?"

"No."

SILENCE for a moment, and Henderson wondered how the man had got this far. Somehow he had fought, clawed his way up the slope, almost to the rim. But he had gone as far as he could. He was dying.

"I want . . . to say something," the lieutenant managed through tight lips.

"All right."

"Come . . . closer."

Henderson worked his way closer. He bent over Bonheur but carefully avoided any physical contact with him. It was like seeing a dead snake and knowing that it was harmless, but still not wanting to touch it. Bonheur breathed heavily, with great effort.

"I've got . . . something . . . for you, Henderson. . ."

Then Henderson saw it. Bonheur was lifting a pistol, laboriously bringing the muzzle to bear on Henderson's chest. Henderson heard his breath whistle between his teeth. His hand slashed out and knocked the pistol into the darkness.

Not a word was spoken. The lieutenant made an almost silent sobbing sound and after a moment he lay still.

"What is it down there?" It was the regimental doctor, calling from the rim.

Henderson said, "It's Lieutenant Bonheur from M Company. He's dead."

The next blazing day and the next endless night were not entirely clear to Henderson. He fought when there were Indians to fight, and when there were none he lay in shocked silence. Custer's name was no longer mentioned among the men. They put their hope in Terry now, but that too was an unreal hope.

[*Turn page*]

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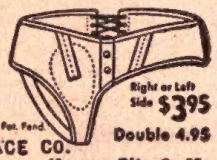

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Custer and his five companies of good tough cavalry were all dead over in a western valley near the Little Big Horn, and what was left of the Seventh cavalry was in no condition to extend the campaign.

"Sergeant," Major Reno said, as the troopers began to collect themselves for the long march home, "will you continue on in charge of your company until we get to Lincoln?"

Surprise cut through the dull edge of Henderson's numbed brain, for there were now commissioned officers present who could take over the command.

"To tell the truth," Reno continued, "I like the way you handle that company." Then he rubbed his grimy face in visible embarrassment. "An officer from M Company came to me with a story—a story that I find it hard to believe."

Henderson merely stood there, too tired to wonder what the major was thinking, too tired to care what was going to happen. He said, "I expect it's true, sir. Part of it, that is. I was cashiered out of the service a long time ago. I guess the officer told you why."

The major stood for a long while, thinking. "Sergeant," he said at length, "I do not believe that record books are absolute and eternal, not even army records. Would you like for me to reopen your case, in view of what has happened here, with a personal recommendation that you be reinstated as second lieutenant, U. S. Cavalry?"

It took some time for the words to register in Henderson's dulled mind. It was almost impossible to realize that he was being offered a chance to close one book and open another with clean pages and begin again.

When he did realize it, there were no words in him.

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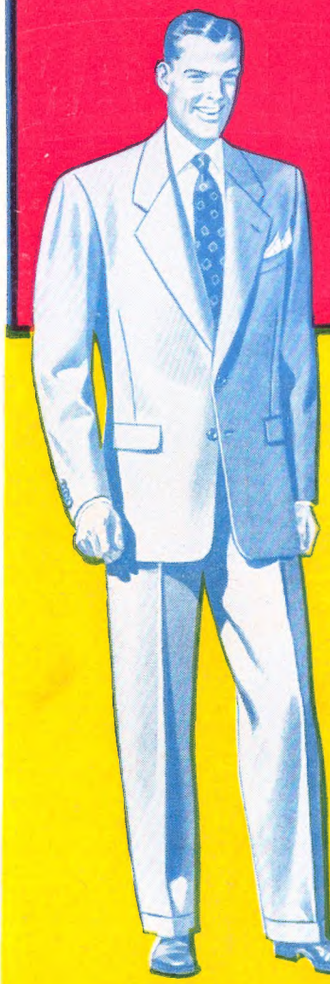

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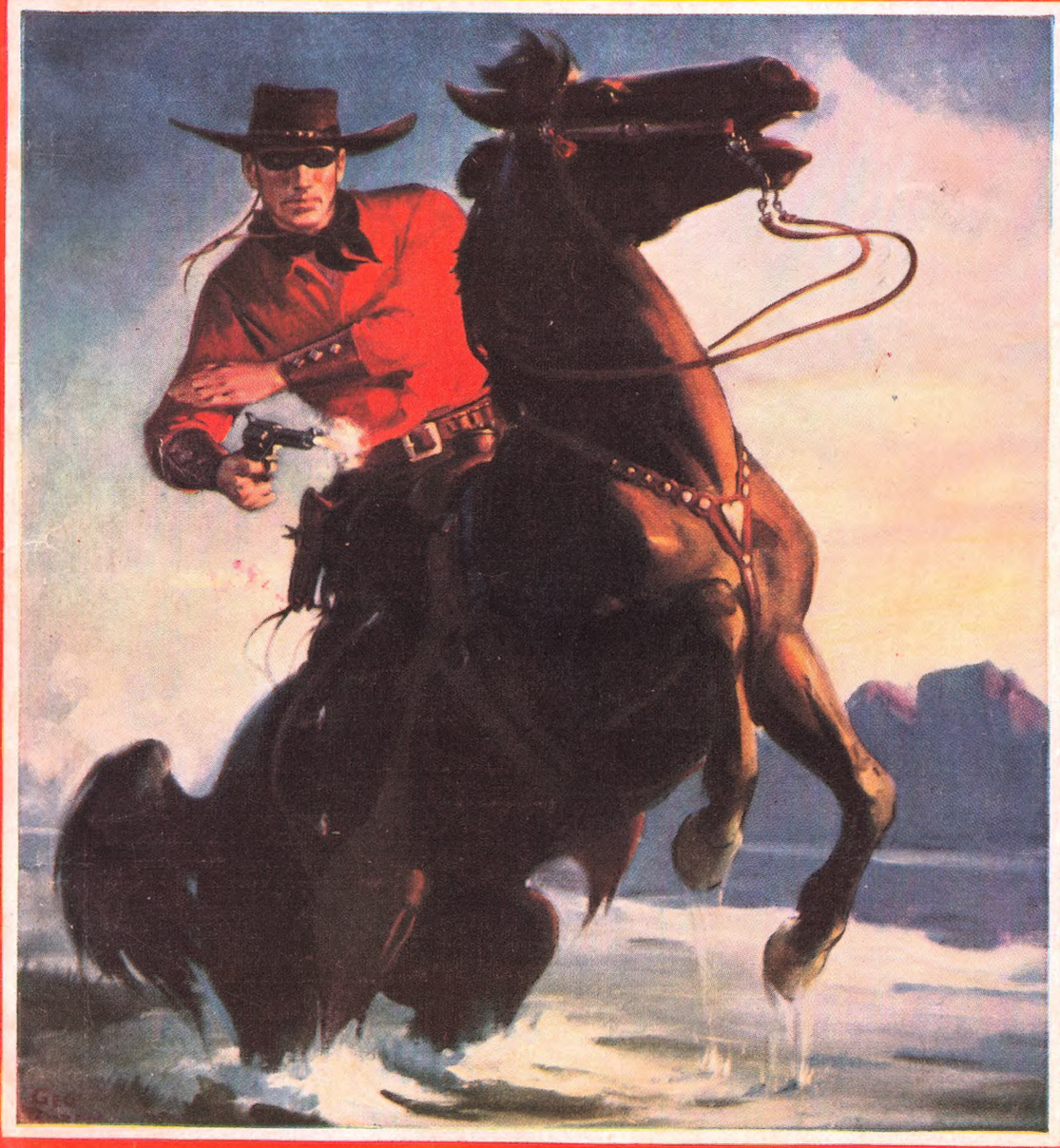

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